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NEEDLES AND PINS

BY
JUSTIN HUNTLY McCARTHY

AUTHOR OF

"If I were King,"

"The Flower of France,"

"The Proud Prince," etc.

"Needles and pins,
Needles and pins,
When a man's married
His trouble begins."

LONDON:
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1907

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TO

S.

If you were queen—ah love, if you were queen
Of sun-red lands, with yellow seas between
Your empire and my house of nightingales,
And some sea-skimmer brought me from his bales
Your picture, hidden in a silver screen,
I would go down unto the harbour green,
And hire a gold and purple brigantine,
And to your kingdom set my painted sails,
If you were queen.

And when I saw, with soul and body clean
Of old idolatries, your glorious mien,
And kneeling cried, "Through many gulfs and gales
To love the loveliest, Love at last prevails,"
Would you to me a little in pity lean,
If you were queen?



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NEEDLES AND PINS.

CHAPTER I.

IN PRAISE OF POITOU.

LONG before it was a Frenchman's duty and a Frenchman's pride to cherish a passion for an undivided land of France it was his duty and his pride to be the patriot of his province. Picard or Angevin, Norman or Gascon, Breton or Provençal, each professed himself the son of his soil with a whole heart, and gloried, to the point of bluster and the fringe of quarrel, in his cognomen, as the child of his state. To a Norman, cider was no less and no other than the drink of the gods ; to a Provençal, Marseilles was the pattern of cities ; there was no wine like the wine of Anjou for an Angevin, or the wine of Gascony for a Gascon ; the sea-creatures of the coast of Brittany were the best eating for a Breton ; those of the coast of Picardy for a Picard, and so on through all the catalogue of the Gallic provinces, whether inland or ocean bound. The province of Poitou was not less fortunate than her sisters in the loyalty of her

children. To hear a Poitevin on his travels speak of his mother-earth you would think it was little less than a patent of nobility to be born within hail of the high-perched, well-walled town of Poitiers, or hard by the haunted forests of Vendée, or on the coast within sight and sound of the mutable waters of the Biscayan bay.

No true Poitevin ever tired of praising his country's climate. It was brisk in spring, suave in summer, calm in autumn, mild in winter. When it rained, the rain was not like the rain of less-favoured regions; it was good for man as well as for cabbages; you might walk abroad in it and be not only none the worse, but, rather, all the better. When it blew, the hoarse winds hooted no dirges as elsewhere, but were as cheerful trumpets encouraging hunger and thirst and the amiable appetities. For your Poitevin was a lusty eater, a lustier drinker, a hearty lover of luxury, a rubber of the hands before any bright fire. The men of Touraine were reputed to be jolly, but the Poitevins held themselves to be jollier in all the essentials of jollity, huger swallows, longer wassailers, brisker gallants. To be in and of Poitou was to savour the fun of life's fair at its best, with a zest and a relish impossible in less happy champagnes. The people of Poitou were so consistent in their self-love as to prefer their own wines to any vintages pressed from more famous vineyards, and as for their goose-pies, why you might travel from Fontenay to Bagdad and back again and never set your teeth in so delicate an edible. Unquestionably there was no place like

Poitou : unquestionably, there were no people like the Poitevins.

So much for the praises of Poitou from the lips of its favoured children. Of course, those that spoke so lovingly of the Upper and the Lower Province were those that knew what they were talking about—great lords and great captains, comfortable ecclesiastics, plethoric country gentlemen, snug burgesses, thriving tradesmen, and the like. They praised the pleasures and privileges that they knew and used daily. There were, it is true, other dwellers in Poitou, and quite a number of them, too ; but nobody ever asked them their opinion of the province, or would have listened if they had proffered one. These were the peasantry—the Jacks as they were indifferently and derisively called, on the easy-going assumption that every peasant must needs have the same name as all the others, a theory which had two well-established corollaries : the first, that all Jacks were as much alike as sheep in a flock ; and the next that no peasant felt hunger or thirst or cold or pain as his betters did. The Jacks were not jolly ; they never ate goose-pie, nor drank kindly wine ; their business was to scratch the earth and starve, and be patient when the Lord of Grigny harried them, and the Lady of Beaumains looked on and laughed when her husband hanged them, and the Bailiff of Vaucelles ground them in the dust. They did not count as Poitevins. The only Poitevins were those lords, captains, ecclesiastics, squires, burgesses, and tradesfolk aforesaid. For them goose-pies were cooked and grapes pressed.

From them, in their jollity, radiated the glory of Poitou.

But if the Poitevins that counted—the Poitevins that were nobles and great captains and princes—ecclesiastical—were well content to consider their province a little paradise, they looked upon it as a paradise whose deliciousness they were ready to keep to themselves, as is the way with those that are sworn in a fellowship of good fortune. He that was not Poitevin born and Poitevin bred was scarcely in their esteem so graced by Heaven with those qualities of heart and head, taste and judgment, as to savour with appreciation the merits of a matchless province and the flavour of a goose-pie. Hence, they eyed with jealousy any alienation of their common inheritance. Poitevin man should wed with Poitevin maid was one part of their creed, but another, and of greater moment, was that Poitevin maid should wed with Poitevin man. For if the men of Poitou were acknowledged by all the world to be the bravest that ever bore sword and the gallantest that ever carried kiss, the maids of Poitou were as readily and generally admitted to hold supremacy for fairness of face and beauty of body over the rest of womankind. These uncontestable premises once established to the complete satisfaction of all Poitevins, it followed logically that for a Poitevin man to miss perfection in wedlock was a folly, and for a Poitevin maid so to blunder was very evidently a sin.

Now it was just such a blunder which upset the well-fed, merry, bibulous self-complacency of the noble folk of Upper Poitou in the early years of

the reign of the good King Louis the Eleventh of blessed memory, who loved droll stories as well as any man. It chanced that some years previously, through causes and for reasons which have nothing to do with the course of this history, a certain young Poitevin lady of a famous ancient house, and herself of so great a beauty that it seemed to beggar her great wealth, found herself by a series of mischances bereft of all her nearest kin, and, in consequence, conspicuous as an isolated image of lonely loveliness. This ended, of course, in the Lady Katherine de Vaucelles becoming the ward of the late King, the pitiable, or, perhaps, rather the to-be-pitied Charles the Seventh, then nearing the end of that troubled reign whose dusk had done something to redeem the shamefulfulness of its dawn. When the sullen Dauphin Louis found himself King, he clung to the guardianship of his beautiful ward with tight fingers, meaning to use her as kings are wont to use their wards, and keep her as a prize for such princely husband as should promise the most service to a somewhat unsteady throne. But the King, who loved to make droll stories as well as to hear them, had a predilection for mystifications, for grim jests at other people's expense; and the Lady Katherine of Vaucelles had a will of her own and a high temper. The result of the strife between the King's whim and the lady's spirit was that the lady fell sea-deep in love with a beggarly rhymer named François Villon, whom the King, in the furtherance of his jest, had palmed off upon her—and others—as a nobleman of lineage and fortune. The King was for

cutting the Gordian knot of his trouble by hanging the poet out of hand, but the lady was so obstinate that she conquered the King's heart, and the adventure ended, not with a gallows, but with a marriage. (If you want to know more of this story you may look for it till you find it in the chronicle of Comines.) The King ennobled the poet, giving him for good the title he had lent him in mockery, confiscated to the Crown a goodly portion of the lady's lands as compensation for his complaisance, and sent the pair packing off to amorous exile in Poitou, where the fair Katherine's ancestral castle mellowed in suns and rains.

Here was a beginning of pretty perturbations in Poitou. It was all very well for the King to claim a right of giving in marriage as part and parcel of his wardship, but were there no splendid gentlemen in Poitou, lovers of beautiful women and broad lands, that he must needs hand her over to this unknown Count of Montcorbier, who was reported, indeed, to have carried himself jauntily in the Burgundian war, but whose title was not inscribed on the golden roll of Poitevin nobility.

A valorous Count of Montcorbier might be all very well in the Isle de France, in Berri, or in Languedoc, but in Poitou, very surely, there were better men. The lords and barons, vidames and seneschals that had kept their own counsel during the war, declaring neither for the King nor for his enemies, finding that there was much to be said for both sides, and therefore saying very little for either, had waited prudently for the peace to publish their allegiance, and in the meantime

had busied themselves with domestic pursuits and pleasures. They tilled their fields, tended their flocks, hawked, hunted, jiggled, jousted and, above all things, made good cheer, like the honest toss-pots they were and the brave eaters of beeves and muttons. When the peace came that set King Louis, something tickle, upon his throne, and sent a Count of Montcorbier into their midst as husband of the lovely Katherine, they were, needs must, King's men, and unable to complain flagrantly of their monarch's conduct. There seemed nothing for it but to make the best of this unpalatable Count of Montcorbier, and do no more than humiliate him by letting him feel his insignificance by the side of the Poitevin gentry.

But the worst was not yet. News travelled slowly from Paris to Poitou, but it did travel, though it were but with the pace of a snail, and when the first horrible reports crossed the frontier the aristocracy of Poitou came near to losing their wits for indignation. This Count of Montcorbier was no gentleman at all, of Languedoc, or Berri, or elsewhere, but a fellow from the kennel, a starveling clerk of Paris, a rhymer of loose ballades, a colleague of bawds and pick-purses, whose name, if such a common combination of homely syllables could be called a name, was François Villon. At first the thing was not to be believed, but when inquiries brought confirmations, including a letter from Messire Noel le Jolys to the Lord Bishop of Poitiers, in which the whole tale was plainly stated, rage and despair reigned in many an ancient castle and stately mansion. It was clear to every offended

gentleman that something must be done, but the mills grind slowly in Poitou, and before the gentlefolk could come to any decision, whether as to petitioning the King or denying admission to the base-born stranger, it came to pass that they woke up one morning and found that the Count of Montcorbier and Katherine his wife were in their midst and had taken up their residence in the old, the war-worn, the illustrious castle of Vaucelles-les-Tours. When the Lord Bishop of Poitiers heard the evil news he murmured something incoherently about the abomination of desolation.

In the rapture of a high passion rewarded, love's laurels round his forehead, love's roses at his feet, a mortal poet is likely to believe that he has found the key to all enigmas, the answer to every sphinx. Beyond that sacrament of marriage lies the earthly paradise: after that sacred draught of the wine of heart's desire, two human beings, a man and a woman, are transmuted from their humanity into an angelship of intimate bliss, where caresses never sate, where desire never dies, where youth is always young and always ardent, where the worm, the serpent, is forgotten; where a pair have no more to do than to stray through glades of enchantment, hand in hand, lip to lip, heart answering heart, from rose-dawns to rose-dusks for ever, world without end.

The purlieus of Paris were never the schools for such romances, but our François, a kind of gutter Endymion, beloved by the moon-goddess, the twin-horned maiden of imagination; or, if you please, the beggar to whom fate had flung the fatal gift of

fancy ; our François, when he travelled life's path with drabs and ragamuffins, had always a head swimming with whimsies and a heart that panted after the water-brooks of Parnassus. While he sculked with trulls and ruffians, he mocked at them and himself with the wrong side of his mouth, and with the right side smiled at them and himself, as if all were linked in some order of chivalry. While the hog in him flattered a wanton, the god in him sighed for Diana in her divinity ; while he helped to pilfer a strong-box, his fingers itched for fairy gold. Being a poet, he made a good rascal while there seemed no escape from the dominion of rascaldom ; but he dreamed dreams, and when his dreams came true, being a poet, he made a good hero while heroism was in the air, and a wonderful lover because he had a wonder-gift of words. It may be that he was made for neither pole of fortune, that his place lay in the merry middle way between the garret of the outlaw and the palace of the prince, where he could have rhymed his rhymes, loved his love, paid his way, and proved, on the whole, a monument of respectability. But the high gods and an ironic king decided his fate, gave him the accolade, made him lord of Montcorbier, gave him the rose, star, pearl of women, made him the husband of Katherine de Vaucelles. It was a delicious imbroglio ; small surprise that he lost his head as well as his heart.

In the marvel-moon of their first love-days Katherine and François alike believed, or assumed, that the candied madness would last for ever, that the fresh zest would never fail, that the sweet food

would never pall. But their sunny confidence in a world made solely for lovers and for summer was to be nipped by the wintry welcome—ill-come it should be called—of Poitou. Bride and groom in the pride of their felicity had given no thought to the acerbities of a pampered province. François, reeling dizzily from triumph in the arms of war to triumph in the arms of love, had no time to concern himself with the possible attitude of a run of country squires and knights. Katherine, in her happy abjection, held that her love, no less than the King's favour, ennobled her lover and made him the peer of the best Poitevin that ever skipped. This sun of illusion was destined to eclipse.

They came to Vaucelles-les-Tours in the twilight of a summer's afternoon, after a leisurely progress from Paris through the fruitful Touraine country, where they had stopped of nights in hospitable abbeys and been made welcome with the royal favour due to royal favourites. When they reached their own domain a household prepared in advance was ready and eager to greet the beautiful mistress who had been so long away at the courts of kings. As for their lady's lord, he was their lady's choice and they asked no more and no better than to wish him well. It seemed a very notable home-coming to the two lovers, with the glow of torches so brisk and cheerful after those last miles of riding through the gathering night, the colour of arras and tapestry in the great hall, the burning logs so cordial in their warmth after the mists of the darkling woods. They sipped spiced wine together out of the same

golden cup, their fingers meeting about its stem, their eyes meeting above its brim, while the burnt juices heated their chilled blood and the fragrant essence dissipated those vague, unmeaning, inevitable fears that haunt the newcomer to a strange place, the bandogs of fancy defending the unknown. Then, while the sweet draught and the sweet glances still thrilled them, Katherine put the golden cup aside and drooped to her knees before her lover in delicate surrender, careless of the staring faces, and cried out to him: "This is thy house, my lord, and I thy happy vassal." The next moment her lover had lifted her to his lips, had strained her to his heart; then, hand in hand and laughing like glad children, they took possession of their kingdom.

While they broke their fast they whispered love-words to each other, and found them as gladly maddening as when they were unfamiliar. In the vast bed-chamber they faced one another for awhile in silence, stricken in the strange place by a divine shyness that forgot and then renewed the bridal night in Paris. It was a notable home-coming for man and wife, for lover and lover, full of generous gifts and benignant promises; the serene air only stirred by the fluttering wings of the angel of love.

To this enchanted haven had capricious fortune wafted the troubled soul of the poet. From the unconscious misery of his life the whim of a cynical king had lifted him to the point of the pyramid: golden opportunity had opened wide to him the doors of her temple, and he had entered in and

done sacrifice, and found favour in the eyes of the fickle goddess and been blessed with success. Now, as he lay by the side of his idol, his wife, the sacred air of their shelter seemed peopled with beautiful presences, the shades of all the lovers of old time, who came about the wedded pair with benisons. A music that was not of common earth flattered his swooning senses with melodies that echoed the sighs of sweethearts. His dreams between midnight and day-dawn were ecstasies, beautiful beyond words, beautiful beyond thought, yet how infinitely less lovely than the reality of the waking and the living neighbourhood of the best beloved. Truly he was fortunate beyond hope, beyond belief, fortunate beyond desire. Truly he had won the rose of the world.

CHAPTER II.

A MILKMAID AND AN ELDER.

IN the prime of the morning François left his bride in the depths of sleep, and gliding through the unfamiliarities of the awakening castle, sought and found the freedom of the fields. Summer was still alert, though swaying to its wane, and the richness of the countryside thrilled him like old wine, or music in church, or the overword of some superb ballade, at once troubling and soothing spirit and flesh with a liberating sensuousness. He had known the country before in his haggard tramps of rascality, known it only, or almost so, as fretful length of ground to be covered between one large town that had become too hot to hold him, and another large town in which the same civic chemistry had yet to be completed. For the first time the town-mouse seemed to understand, though as yet dimly, what those sights and sounds might mean to him in time. The birds that chuckled in the hedges, the late flowers that flamed at his feet, the greenness still living in grass and tree, the clean ring of his feet on the highway, were all delicious marvels, but marvels that had a meaning, good

to seek for and good to learn. He did not think of all this kingdom as his dominion : he thought of it as hers, in which it was his astonishing privilege to find himself a guest. She was his wife, the lady of this enchanted land—his wife, his wife.

He wandered along in a beatitude, wondering now and then what the name of this plant and that blossom might be, and then deciding that it mattered no whit so long as the things existed in their simplicity ; listening to the maitns of a lark in the blue and failing to find words that might interpret its exultation ; trying to catch rhymes that would picture his bliss, and amazed to find his ready Muse deny him in this moment of delight. It began to dawn upon him that there were things too lovely to be run into verse by such as he, even though the breath of love had purged his spirit as with fire. He had shaken off his slough of uncleanness ; of that he felt sure. He was not ashamed of yesterday's vagabond, scamp, rascal. That shadow had lived such a life as God had been pleased to give him according to the laws of that life, not without decorum of a kind, not without distinction. But that page was turned, that scroll rolled up for good and all. On a sheet of clean parchment he had already written the prologue to a new life. François Villon, clerk of Paris, was, as it were, dead and buried, and the Count of Montcorbier dwelt, a happy country gentleman, with his sweetheart in Poitou.

Now it chanced that while Master François swam in this summer's ecstasy he came to a meadow

with many cows in it and a maid milking one of the cows. As he came near her the girl was aware of his coming, and she lifted her head and looked at him, and he saw that she was comely, with smooth, sun-ripened skin, and black hair, and black eyes that watched him unceasingly while her nimble fingers plied the udders. As Villon approached her he gave her good-morning civilly, reflecting with satisfaction that there was once a time when he would have liked, and tried, to kiss her, such time being now obliterated, vanished, annihilated. The girl gave him back his greeting and continued to eye him.

"You are the new lord of the Manor?" she said, questioning as one questions who knows the answer, and she laughed as she spoke, and her voice had a rhythm and her laughter had a tune, and Villon halted to listen and to look.

"I suppose I am the lord of the Manor," he answered gaily, for the maid's laughter was communicative, and his spirits were brisk, "but I do not think about that."

The maid never paused in her milking, never paused in her scrutiny of the man.

"You look happy," she said, and there was still the pulse of laughter in her tongue. François found entertainment in her query.

"I look happy," he told her, "because I am happy, because I have every right to be happy."

"That may not last long," the girl asserted, and she still slurred her words because of the laughter that was within her. Villon stared at her in a puzzle.

"I am enough of a schoolman," he said whimsically, "to remember that one Solon, a learned clerk of Greece, whose name I am sure your ears never heard before this day, told King Croesus that no man could be accounted happy till his death. Do I find the spirit of the sage in the shell of the dairymaid?"

For only answer the girl began to sing a little song that had no more than a rag of an air to cover its nakedness, and this is what she sang:

"Needles and pins,
Needles and pins,
When a man's married
His trouble begins."

She finished her singing and her milking at the same moment, and quitting her cow, stood up and eyed him, smiling.

If the Villon of old days would have been tempted to kiss the wench for her impudence, now the lord of Montcorbier felt more inclined to thump her for her silly ditty, and her mien of insolence.

"You are a quaint maid," he said, smiling as those seek to smile who have taken something too hot in their mouths and would outface their mishap. "Who taught you that cynic's tag?"

"It is a piece of nursery wisdom," the girl answered demurely. "I have known it since I was an inch high. I am not a man, I thank Heaven! and I am not married, for which Heaven and the gentlemen are much to be blamed, but I fear there is much wit in the jingle."

"Not to my thinking," Villon answered stoutly. He was not going to be dashed in his gladness by

A MILKMAID AND AN ELDER. 17

a minx and a bit of doggerel. "There is no such blessing in the world as a true marriage to a true man."

"So you say," the girl answered, bantering. "As I tell you, I am not wedded, and do but preach the sermons of my betters."

She lifted a yoke to her shoulders as she spoke, and hoisted a pailful of milk on each of the pendant hooks. She still kept her eyes steadily on François' face, and he fancied there was both defiance and enticement in her smile. He thanked Heaven that he was now armoured against all such enticement.

"Can I help you to carry your milk-pails?" he asked.

She shook her head. "They are light things enough, and I am used to them," she answered gaily. She made as if to depart, but Villon, he scarce knew why, detained her.

"I have a wish for a drink of milk," he said; and then, seeing that the girl's eyes seemed to mock his modest desire, he added, somewhat tartly: "I suppose I shall not be denied a draught of my own milk." For the lord of Montcorbier took himself to be on his own lands, and the girl for a kind of vassal.

The girl lowered her pails with a pleasant smile. "Drink what you will," she said, "if you can drink from the pail's lip, for I have no cup with me. But while I do not deny your thirst I deny your assertion, for this milk is no milk of yours."

"Do you mean that the cow is yours?" François asked.

The girl was looking at him very quizzically and her pretty grin irritated him a little. The girl nodded her head without speaking.

"Well," François went on, "the cow may be yours, but if it grows fat and yields well on my grass I think I may still lay claim to the milk."

The minx shrugged her shoulders. "If my cow grew fat and yielded well from feeding on your grass there would be weight in your words, but she does no such thing, poor lassie."

"How now," Villon asked; "am I not standing on my own land and treading my own grass?"

The girl shook her head.

"You have a fair domain, my lord of Montcorbier, but it does not lap over the edge of the world, and though Vaucelles-les-Tours be a good castle there is still another house or two in Poitou. But perhaps it is natural that one who is new to the holding of land should exaggerate his tenure."

Villon looked down his nose somewhat ruefully. The girl was discomforting; she deserved a cuffing, but she had him at a vantage, and she was undeniably comely. So, with a slightly forced hilarity, he questioned: "On whose land then do I trespass?"

"Why," said the girl, "for the matter of that, the land is mine, or, perhaps I should more rightly say, my father's, and yet again, perhaps I do not say rightly when I say that. But however that may be, the land is ours, and consequently the grass upon it, and the cow, and consequently the milk. And now, good lord, are you satisfied?"

"Who may your father be, pretty logician?" Villon asked.

The girl looked provocative.

"Ah!" she answered, "ask me no questions and I will tell you no lies. But for the enlargement of your wisdom I will say that my father is the lord of Little House."

"Little House!" echoed François, "and where may that be?"

"It is but a little ways from here," the girl answered, "though you cannot see it from where we stand, for the slope of the hill. If you care to go with me as far as the end of the meadow you can satisfy your curiosity."

The morning was still very young. The maid amused him, puzzled him. "I should like to see Little House," he admitted.

"Well and good," said the girl, "but first will you not satisfy your thirst with a draught of that milk which you now know to be mine?" And as she spoke she unslung her pails from the yoke.

"I thank you," said François, and, stooping, lifted one of the full pails carefully to his lips, and sipped with difficulty some mouthfuls of the warm fluid. For all his care he did not escape from spilling some of the milk on his jerkin, and this the girl wiped away with her apron, laughing merrily the while. Then she slung her pails again, bade the mild-eyed cow good-bye, and set off briskly in spite of her burden along the meadow with François stalking by her side.

It was as the girl had promised. At the end of the meadow they turned the slope of the little

wooded hill and then directly in front of him Villon beheld Little House.

Petitmanoir, Little House, was a singular building. It had at one time been a castle and a stronghold, but time had made merry with it and levelled its pretensions. Though its four towers were still standing, three of them were in different degrees of ruin, and their crumbling battlements and galleries wore an air of gaunt melancholy and decay that contrasted strangely with the condition of the fourth tower. This tower, with the adjoining parts of the building, was in good condition, stood solidly capable of defence, and asserted cheerfully the fact that it was occupied and cared for. The main courtyard had been converted into a flourishing and orderly garden, partly for flowers, partly for vegetables and herbs, whose glow of greenery and variegated colour wore an enhanced gaiety from the sombreness of its surroundings, while its vigorous manifestation of the fruitfulness of earth seemed to deride the dilapidation that was the fortune of the handiwork of man. There were also some farm buildings under the shelter of the uninjured tower, and in spite of the somewhat gloomy neighbourhood of the shattered remains, Petitmanoir presented itself to the eyes of the stranger as a neither unpleasant nor undesirable residence.

On the grassy space in front of the open door of Little House an elderly gentleman was walking slowly to and fro taking the air. He was habited very soberly in black ; his white hair flowed to his shoulders from beneath a bonnet of the same dark hue as the rest of his habit. His wrinkled cheeks

were as plump and pink as a winter pear ; his gait, if leisurely, was not feeble, and as they drew nearer Villon perceived that he was blithely whistling the lilt of a drinking song.

"Is that your father?" François asked of the girl by his side.

"That is the lord of Little House," she answered sedately, and then she, too, began to whistle the same air that the elder in black was twittering for his delectation, and straightway the elder's ears caught the sound—for the merry maid sent a lusty volume of sweet breath through her pursed lips—and turning, waved his hands in salutation to the girl. Then, seeing that she did not return alone, he advanced over the grass in slow and dignified manner to meet her and her companion.

"My father is a man of much learning," said the milkmaid. "You may savour his company, if, as they say, you have more scholarship than nobility." And she glanced at her companion with the provocative mockery that marked her conduct towards the lord of Montcorbier.

"My scholarship, God knows, is little enough," Villon answered cheerfully, for the girl was too pretty to be vexing, "and as for my nobility, I come of Adam's line, that was the first gentleman in the world, and if the King has been pleased to better my late condition, why, that is the King's privilege, which who shall deny?"

"Aye," said the girl thoughtfully, "the King's privilege can ennoble, and so can the King's blood." She met Villon's questioning look with a stare and a laugh. "Tell me, scholar-lord," she asked, "is

it true that you are a poet, like the Duke of Orleans ? ”

“ I am a writer of rhymes,” Villon admitted diffidently, “ though not, alas, such as sweetened the lips of my lord of Orleans.”

“ Then my father will like you,” the girl affirmed, “ for he loves songs and singers, rhymes and rhymers. And I, too, will like you,” she added pensively, “ if you will write some rhymes in praise of my beauty.”

“ The theme might well inspire,” said François. Then he added maliciously : “ But you take your beauty for granted more than is the custom of modest youth.” “ Here,” he thought, “ you are paid back for your digs at my gentility.” But the girl was not in the least abashed by his reproof.

“ Dear lord,” she cried, “ it is ill-marketing if you have lilies to sell to cry them for weeds. Why, if there were no mirror in Little House, nor no stream in Poitou to yield me my image, I should think beauty my birthright.”

“ Why so ? ” asked Villon, diverted by the girl’s directness.

“ My mother was the loveliest woman of her day,” the maid declared proudly. “ I remember her but little, but I know what was said of her, thought of her, done with her. Ask my father——” She paused for an instant, then resumed : “ Ask the lord of Little House, some day, and he will tell you. But for my own beauty, I fear it will have to go without your rhymes.”

“ Now, why should it——” François began, but she cut short his protestations.

"I think, if you reflect, that you will find a good reason," she said, "or, if you do not find it to-day, you will find it to-morrow or next day after. I shall believe in your verses when I hear them."

While Villon was wondering what his tormentress meant, the distance between them and the lord of Petitmanoir had dwindled to meeting-point. The girl came to a halt and unhooked her pails to ease her shoulders.

"Father," the girl said, "here is our good neighbour, the lord of Montcorbier, that has come to make friends with us."

The old man extended his hand with ceremonious courtesy, and Villon, as he clasped it, noticed that it was white and fine, like the hand of clerk or cleric.

"Sir," said the old gentleman politely, "I am very pleased to have knowledge of you. Though my lineage is as old as you please, I have, I thank Heaven, no prejudices, and will take the hand of any man the King is pleased to honour."

Here he wrung Villon's hand again in yet more friendly fashion before relinquishing it. His pink wrinkled face was smiling whimsically, and his pale blue eyes had a comical expression in them that was more of mockery than of scorn and more of condescension than of mockery. He was certainly not in the least like his daughter, who stood by, watching the pair and laughing silently. Villon found the situation rather uncomfortable, and stammered some thanks for the elder's greeting, which that elder instantly brushed on one side.

"Say no more," he insisted, "say no more. I

am a philosopher. I take men—and women”—this last as if an afterthought and in a lower tone—“as I find them. I would all were of my mind, and you will wish so too, soon enough, no doubt. Will you cross the threshold of Little House and drink wine?”

Villon thanked him and declined. He was awaited at home and must return thither with all speed. The elder made no attempt to detain him.

“A man’s first duty is to his home,” he agreed cordially, “and when a man is so fortunate in his home as you are he can afford to disregard the lack of amenity elsewhere. On my honour, you will always be welcome to Little House. I mean it; I mean it.”

“Especially if you bring those rhymes with you,” the girl chimed in mischievously, as she picked up her pails again.

Then and there the three parted, the elder and the maid going towards Little House, the old lord with his hand affectionately upon the girl’s arm, Villon returning hurriedly to Vaucelles-les-Tours with a mind considerably perplexed by the events of the morning and the cryptic utterances of the folk of Little House.

CHAPTER III.

THE COLD SHOULDER.

KATHERINE was still sleeping when he returned, and he woke her with a kiss. A little later, when they had broken their fast, she bade him come with her on a journey over the castle and the two as merry as a pair of school-children, entered upon a delightful frolic. They climbed great staircases on whose ample steps full twenty men might with ease have stood abreast, eighteen of the twenty men having extended hands resting upon neighbouring shoulders. They climbed little staircases winding in the thickness of turret walls, spirals so narrow that but one person could, and that with difficulty, creep up or down them at a time. They drifted down corridors hung with ancient tapestry, and here François was able to entertain Katherine greatly. For the faded blues and yellows, greens and crimsons, of the needle-work had been woven in illustration of the legends of Greece as those legends had been cherished in the verse of Rome. Villon poured the wine of Ovid for his bride, ran recollected verses into nimble rhyme on the instant, and flushed with

pleasure to note how Katherine's eyes brightened as he told her the tale of Daphne fading into laurel under the amorous breathing of the God, or fill with tears as he whispered the tragedy of the nightingale and the swallow. Then, when he came to the loyal and lovely fable of Laodamia with its lesson of deathless constancy, she flung herself into his arms weeping and laughing, and they clung together, living and loving, while the faded shapes of the lovers of old time seemed wistfully to contemplate their ecstasy. Oh, golden hours of a golden day!

When they had wandered all over the castle and Katherine had paid for her lover's Roman tales with many legends and histories, some grim, some trivial, of the former lords and ladies of Vaucelles-les-Tours, certain of whose gaunt or gracious ghosts were still whispered to haunt the castle, they went out into the scented summer air and strayed through gardens and orchards and meadows, as happy as happy. They walked very joyously; they rained caresses upon each other as thickly as the waning roses rained their petals; they renewed first hours of wooing, found ever new pleasures in sweet fellowship, courted each other with dainty nay-words and pretty by-play, acting, in fact, as newly-wed lovers have acted since the dawn and will act till the dusk. That day, like the many days that followed it, was an idyll of tender desires, of exquisite sensations, of rapture succeeding rapture, of joy giving place to joy. The youth of the world was in their breathings, in the pulses of their blood; their very

flesh seemed to be tempered with celestial essence, and the fierceness of the god was as a fire that consumed and renewed its worshippers.

Somehow, though for no reason that he could clearly discover, François said nothing to Katherine about his morning's visit to Little House, in the immediate time of his return therefrom, and afterwards the sequent enchantments of an enchanted day banished from his mind all thought of the whimsical elder and the impudent milkmaid. But later in the day, when they sat at meat together, happily languorous, deliciously weary, there came to François a sudden recollection of his new acquaintances, and he asked Katherine if she knew anything of a certain lord of Petitmanoir, who was, it seemed, their neighbour. Katherine told him all she knew. The lord of Petitmanoir was a gentleman of honourable descent, and at one time of noble fortune. This fortune, however, he briskly dissipated at the court of the late king till nothing was left him but his crumbling mansion in Poitou, with its few remaining acres of land, more suited to a poor farmer than to a seigneur of ancient race and many quarterings. It was even thought at one time that this poor portion had passed from his hands, but this was soon seen not to be the case, for one fine day he returned to the ruined place bringing with him apparently a well-filled purse, and certainly a very young and very beautiful wife that came of a good family of Touraine. This comely creature very speedily presented her spouse, who was her senior by more than a generation of years, with a daughter, whom nobody believed to be his,

and whom most people alleged to be a child of the then Dauphin, now reigning as King Louis the Eleventh. This general opinion found confirmation in the fact that after the death of the young mother, which happened about four years after the birth of her child, Prince Louis often visited Petitmanoir and treated its lord with marked favour.

Katherine's narrative illuminated much that had puzzled François in his morning's meeting. So that was why the damsel was so fantastic of speech with regard to her father. Plainly she knew, or guessed, the secret of her parentage, and took a wild pride in her royal blood. He asked Katherine some questions about the lord of Little House and his daughter, but got no satisfactory answers. Katherine had not been at Vaucelles since she was a girl in her mid-teens, and though she recalled some sight of the child of Little House, and believed she remembered her as pretty, more she was not able to say of her. The so-named father she recollected a little better, florid, white-haired, stately, but he kept for the most part within the limits of his own little domain and seldom stirred abroad. The assumed parentage of the girl was, of course, no cause of offence to any of his neighbours. Poitou was not squeamish, and king's blood was king's blood, however it might be come by.

Those first days at Vaucelles were days of Paradise for those newly-wed lovers. Villon was far too happy to find much time for rhyming. Why, he asked himself, should a man make verses whose existence was a Song-Royal of joy? Yet he made

some verses, none the less. Katherine was too happy to remember the pride that could stiffen her into steel, to be aware of that sleeping spirit which, when roused, could rend her as the pangs of inspiration rent the pythoness. Summer still dowered the world with its richness of colour, of odour, of warmth. Love was still the stranger, the angel with the wings of flame, whose coming had transformed the world and whose presence promised that the change should be abiding. Who could ever tire of kisses and whispers, of passion, of adoration, of raptures rekindling with each dawn? The apples of the orchard of love, the roses of love's garden, the wine of love's vintage; could lips of lover ever weary of such sweets? François, with the confidence, the philosophy of cheerfulness that years of squalor had not starved, nor weeks of splendour glutted, vexed himself with no such questions. Katherine, in the gladness of her womanhood, vexed herself with no such questions. Had both been faced by such questions they would have met them gallantly with denial. The world was a wonder-world for the poet and for the poet's wife in the prime of their alliance.

It was on one wet day during this merry time, a day that kept them indoors and denied them the gardens and the orchards and the lawns, that he wrote for his sweet mistress this ballade of love in foul weather :

“ Though sullen mists make spring appear a fable,
And sunshine but a memory of things dead,
Though winds be chill, and rain from every gable
Descends in streams on every passing head,

Still can my heart, with summer's fancies fed,
 Finding Elysium in the wintry weather,
 On muddy roads see noble roses shed,
 This happy day that brings us twain together.

"To-day the pretty love-saint that is able
 To change grey streets and give green fields instead,
 Shall sit, a shining presence, at our table,
 To bless us when our lips and fingers wed,
 And work such wonder with our wine and bread,
 That as we drink and eat we marvel whether
 Our banquet be for gods or mortals spread,
 This happy day that brings us twain together.

"Darling, rejoice ; although the skies wear sable
 We fly the summer's colours, white and red ;
 What need have we to fear the storm, who stable
 The winged steed, whom we can mount to tread
 The airy way to fairyland ahead :
 One kiss, ere we our Pegasus untether,
 A road among the reeling stars to thread,
 This happy day that brings us twain together."

ENVOY.

"My princess, the unwelcome clouds have fled ;
 The four-leaved clover and the whitest heather
 Grow to our wish in every garden bed,
 This happy day that brings us twain together."

How Katherine kissed him when he whispered these verses, and how they both smiled at the driving rain and rejoiced in their knowledge that whatever tempests might vex the heavens the warmth of their love could at all times kindle for them the glow of an abiding summer.

The happy days of a happy week came in due course to their Sunday, when the lord and lady of Vaucelles-les-Tours decided to ride in state to Poitiers to hear Mass at the Cathedral of St. Pierre. The morning was steeped in clear sun-

shine, one of those exquisite mornings sometimes given to waning summer when the bright air, free from all hint of wane or decay, seems only reminiscent of the clarity of the spring. All the way to the ancient town the little cavalcade was as gay as gay, horses trotting, housings shining, bits jingling, plumes tossing, steel gleaming, vestures glowing, the whole a jovial cloud of colour steadily drifting along the winding highway towards the hill of spires. Katherine rode at the head with her lover by her side, and never had she seemed more fair in that lover's eyes, with the morning's warmth in her cheeks, with the morning brightness in her eyes. Villon was an optimist in practice. He might reflect upon and regret the brevity of life, its irony, and the tragedy of a woman's beauty. But, in fact, he took the passing hour for what it was worth and made the best of it, and his hours of late had been so vivid, so brilliant, that his scepticism had been lulled, had slumbered; he had let the sleeping dogs of fortune lie. But the huntress and her hounds were awake, alert, and hot on his heels.

Up the narrow winding streets of the ancient town the little company clattered, lord and dame, ladies, pages, and armed servants, in brave show, since for all it was time of peace, no person of distinction rode abroad without an escort, greater or less according to his means and desire for display. As they penetrated further towards the interior of the town the streets became more thronged, compelling the party from Vaucelles-les-Tours to go at a walking pace. The good burgesses

of the city were quitting their shops and dwellings in obedience to the mighty call of the bell that was clanging high up in the Cathedral tower. From different directions came other companies of gentle-folk on horseback, dressed in their best and attended by their retainers, making from their out-lying manors and castles for the Cathedral square. Villon, always infinitely amused by any manifestation of human activity, delighted in the animated scene all about him, in the variegated pattern of the crowd with its shuffle of strong colours, in the persistent tramping of many feet towards a common centre, a solemn music, broken and lightened by the frequent clink of horseshoes on the cobbles. He was, indeed, so entertained by what he saw—for though it was little other than what he had seen hundreds of times in Paris, still this was not Paris but Poitiers, which made all the difference—he was so diverted that he scarcely noted how the face of more than one rider frowned at him as he and his came riding by. He noticed without noticing, it might be said. He remembered later some faint impression of a scowl on this man's countenance, of a sneer on that lady's lip, but at the time he thought not of it, or, if he thought at all, set it down to some impatience of the impetuosity with which his high spirits led him to direct the course of his companion and his following through the tortuous passages.

When they reached the open space in front of the Cathedral it seemed as if all the world was dismounting. Knights lifted ladies from their saddles, squires led riderless horses to bait while

service lasted, retainers gathered together in little groups, distinguished by their badges, waiting till the great folk had gone into the church that they might follow in their turn. Villon was tickled by the bustle about him, sincerely glad to be squiring his sweet lady to the ancient House of God. He had been no bigoted church-goer in his graceless days, but at his naughtiest his nature was too sensitive not to ache at the summons of church bells, at the smell of the incense, at the candles in the darkness, at the roll, now lulling, now thunderous, of the Latin words. Nay, more, despite all protestations to the contrary, aired for the edification of his comrades, he would sooner, all things being equal, have plundered a burgess than a church. All things being equal, of course.

Villon aided Katherine to dismount, and then armed her across the place and through the great door of the Cathedral. The women and pages followed; a couple of squires took charge of the horses, and the men-at-arms joined their kind in the dark spaces at the back. Katherine knew well the seats where those of her house had the prescriptive right to sit, so it was she who led Villon up the aisle to the old oaken stall bearing the carved arms of the lords of Vaucelles, which stood at the very head of the congregation. Now, as they came to these same seats, Villon, ever looking about him as was his way wherever he might happen to be, noted a curious thing. All the stalls, benches, seats, in the immediate neighbourhood of the Vaucelles stall for a distance of several feet in each direction were unoccupied. In consequence of this,

the Vaucelles stall stood isolated, a lonely island in a sea of empty benches. Further, he noted that when a late arrival seeking sitting-room made to enter this vacant, grateful haven, another that seemed to act as a kind of guard or sentinel, stayed his progress, whispered him some word in the ear, and directed him elsewhere, leaving inviolate the waste space about the Vaucelles seat. As the party from Vaucelles-les-Tours took their places, Katherine, who was sincerely religious, knelt in prayer, her face buried in her hands, and knew nothing and heeded nothing of what was going on around her. But, his lively curiosity ever keener than his reverence, Villon peeped about him through his latticed fingers and saw the ceremonies for keeping the area about them desolate repeated more than once. He was aware also that the attention of the congregation, and especially of that portion of it which was composed of the gentry, was fixed with an embarrassing intensity upon him and his. It was plain that there was a confederacy afoot to separate the lord and lady of Vaucelles-les-Tours from their fellow-worshippers, and those that were privy to the scheme managed their plans so successfully that when the service began Villon and Katherine, with their companions, were set apart as in a pillory, the staring-stock of all the rest of the assembly.

When Katherine lifted her head from her prayers, though Villon made her no sign, it was impossible for her not to be aware of the strange position in which she was placed. François noted her face grow pale and then flush and then pale again ; after which

change she sat very steadily, looking straight before her, as cold and composed as any of the marble faces that gazed on humanity from arch or pillar. Villon, had he been alone, would have cared very little for any aloofness the Poitevins might have been pleased to display in his regard. But as he was not alone their attitude failed to divert him, and failed also to leave him indifferent. He began to understand now the vague vaticinations of the lord of Little House, and his bland protestations of lack of prejudice.

Slowly the service moved along ; Katherine and François following the ritual gravely, with quiet faces as folk whose sole concern in a church was with their supplications and responses. But for all he seemed so demure and discreet, Villon had in his mind a bull-faced Gog-Magog of a man with red hair that seemed to have been most active in the machinations that had for object the setting apart of the comers from Vaucelles. A bull-faced, red-headed fellow that seemed to wear authority ; whose word none seemed to question. Villon had passed mentally from a hot desire to kill this man to the compilation of a scurrilous ballade in which Bull-face showed to poor advantage, when he suddenly remembered where he was and the unfitness in such a place of thoughts of slaughter, or such employment as the making of lampoons.

In the accustomed halt a florid person in episcopal robes mounted into the pulpit and began to address his flock. But if he spoke to the majority of his congregation who followed him for the most part with staring eyes and gaping mouths, he spoke

at the small minority that came from Vaucelles-Tours and that sat together in humiliating exclusion, patent targets for the bishop's scorn. The bishop had found a text which seemed to him a happy peg on which to hang an address that bitterly denounced intruders into the fold, wolves in sheeps' clothing, rascals masquerading as aristocrats. "Will ye drink the dregs of the kennel," the choleric bishop asked his audience, "even though it be presented to you in a vessel of gold studded with jewels ? "

In this spirit he harangued his congregation for more than half an hour of acrimony, invective, vituperation, and abuse, which seemed, however, to be very much to the taste of the good Poitevins there gathered together. Katherine sat rigid, her gaze fixed on a great image of St. Christopher that stood against a pillar in front of her. Villon never took his eyes from the angry bishop's face. He would have liked to laugh, for the bishop's speech seemed to him wordy, turbid, a puddle of muddy denunciations. How much better, he thought, the attack would have been managed had he, François Villon, been in the place of the exhortatory bishop. How he would have out-Pasquined Pasquin ; how he would have pricked, tickled, pinched, nipped, twitched the sensibilities of his victim ; how he would have tattered his vanity, battered his arrogance, thumped him, bumped him, un-peacocking the poor jackdaw, delionizing the poor jackass to a tune of inextinguishable hilarity. But it was ill-behaviour to laugh in church ; poor gentleman though he was, and poor Christian

though he might be, Master François clung to so much manners. So he only smiled a tiny sprite of a smile while the bishop mouthed and foamed and spluttered, thereby making the choleric cleric more voluble and more gross and, to François' way of thinking, more feeble and more foolish. But all the while from the corner of his eye Villon took heed of a bull-faced, red-headed giant to whom the bishop's words seemed as balsam and hyssop and myrrh and spikenard and frankincense and honey, and all other sweet-smelling and sweet-tasting commodities, he did so snuff them up and swallow them down and appear to swell in port with the inhaling and absorbing thereof.

When the bishop's vocabulary of objurgation had been twice or thrice exhausted, when he had gathered his scattered expletives again and yet again, as archers in a skirmish when their enemies withdraw rush from cover to wrench their missiles from the bodies of the fallen and fit them afresh to yew and string, when he had no breath left in his body and no idea left in his head, then he made an end of his sermon and staggered from the pulpit. The rest of the service was gone through, the solemn words of dismissal spoken, the ceremony was at an end. The humble folk huddled together at the back, who, for the most part, had understood little of the bishop's thunder and cared less for its meaning, were pouring forth into the open and the sunlight. But red-headed Bull-face sat in his place, and the other Poitevin gentry—lords and ladies—sat with him and stared at the Vaucelles stall.

CHAPTER IV.

A ROADSIDE JEST.

VILLON rose leisurely, gave his hand to Katherine, and led her from her seat through the barren land about them to the aisle. Down the aisle Villon and Katherine walked slowly to the church door; Katherine holding her head high and showing only by a slightly heightened colour her consciousness of insult; Villon surveying with a pleasing indifference the mass of lowering faces turned towards them. He was too practised an actor on the shabby stages of the world, even if he were new to its gilded scenes, to be at all abashed or embarrassed by the presence of an audience. Behind them came the women, giggling and tittering to hide their discomfiture, and the pages grinning. Thus, in dignified indignity, did the lord and lady of Vaucelles-les-Tours make their way to the church door and into the open air. As soon as they had reached the door their enemies rose and followed them in a body.

On the threshold Villon paused for a moment and surveyed the place crowded with people, revolving like pious Aeneas, many cares in his mind. Yonder stood his horses, with his servants about

them, a little group of shining steel and bright colour. There were many such groups in the square; Villon guessed swiftly at the number of fighting men they represented. For all his quiet demeanour Villon raged inwardly. He longed to take Bull-face by the nose, to have it out with him, to teach him that the fire-new lord of Montcorbier was the better man. But he foresaw what a brawl would blaze up about him; he thought of his little handful of followers, twelve in all, and realized that he was hopelessly outnumbered. Katherine must be got away in safety, at any cost of swallowed pride. It was more than probable that their departure would not be interfered with, that they would be suffered, at least this time, to go unmolested. Much as the Poitevin lords might dislike the newcomer, they would remember that he was a King's man, that loyal Touraine was hard by, and that it would be foolish to offend King Louis needlessly in the person of his servant.

All these thoughts skipped through Villon's mind as, still holding Katherine's hand, he led her slowly to where the horses waited. No one impeded their progress, no one made to hinder Villon as he lifted Katherine to her palfrey, or sought to stay him as he swung himself into his saddle. In front of the Cathedral were now clustered the lords and ladies of Poitou, watching their departure. At their head stood Bull-face, and Bull-face now shouted: "Take a friend's advice, knave. Let one lesson serve to teach you that Poitiers prefers your room to your company." A great

roar of laughter greeted this sally, and it was with that hostile merriment ringing in his ears that Villon, still apparently indifferent to derision and deaf to insult, led his little company at a walking pace out of the square.

As they trailed thus tamely off, the rabble, ever on the side of success, began to jeer and gibe and hoot, not, indeed, being very sure why they were jeering and gibing and hooting, but cruelly diverted by the spectacle of a minority of outcasts spurned, flouted, and hounded by a truculent and blustering majority. To these yells from the kennel Villon paid as little heed as he had paid to the threats from the church porch. On the same steady pace he quitted the square, nor did he increase his speed till he and his silent company had picked their way through the now re-thronging streets and were free of the town again.

As they began to trot along the highway François turned to Katherine with a question.

"Who was the man with the face like a bull and the hair like Iscariot who gave us the God-speed so pleasantly?"

Katherine turned upon François a face drawn with anger and set with scorn.

"Why can you possibly wish to know?" she countered; and Villon's heart seemed to shiver a little as he listened, for once only had he heard her voice sound harshly on his ears. But he answered her as quietly and as blithely as before.

"A hunger and thirst for knowledge and a desire to be acquainted with my neighbours."

She glanced at him for a second with a sullen

look of scorn on her face ; then she turned her head away.

"I should have thought the best way to learn his name would be to glean it from his own lips. He would scarcely have denied you his title if you had challenged it just now."

Her words wounded the flesh of his spirit wickedly. He saw himself piteous as Saint Sebastian, his flesh eloquent with the bloody mouths of the arrows of the beloved. Behind him he seemed to hear the whispers of those that followed, questioning, wondering, commenting. For what they said and thought he cared nothing, but it was agony to find that Katherine condemned him. Nevertheless, he hid his pain.

"Still, I pray you, give me his name," he entreated gently. "I shall be glad to know it against we meet again."

Katherine, her mutinous chin thrust forward, her whole nature a flame of rage, was stubborn in unreconciliation.

"You are not very likely to meet him again," she said bitterly ; "but as for his name he is the Lord Gontier de Grigny. Yet I think that now you are not much wiser than you were."

"I thank you," Villon said simply, and for a while they rode on in silence. But after a little he spoke again.

"Katherine, Katherine," he said, "why are you wrath with me, sweeting ?"

She swung round upon him with a raging face, its immobility suddenly whipped into fury by the stings of her humiliation.

"Do not call me sweeting," she whispered fiercely. "A pretty sweetheart, when you see me mocked in my own province, and look on with dumb tongue and dead hand."

Villon gazed at her wistfully. Was this inconsequent spitfire his idol of desire, his passionate companion, his divine wife? He had known too many women to know much about women, and the transformation staggered him. But a tolerance begotten of his own sense of discomfiture was stronger than his wonder and prompted him to calm and a query.

"What would you have had me do, dear heart?"

Here was a question that fanned Katherine's fire, for she had not the slightest idea what she would have had him do. All she knew was that she, representative of the noblest family of Poitou, in whose veins ran the blood of princes, had been openly flouted, in turn, by bishop, nobles, and mob, the three estates for once in unison to deride her and the man she had chosen to marry. And that man, who had shown himself soldier and statesman, could find nothing better to do than to slink tamely away while the lords of Poitou laughed, the ladies of Poitou sniggered, and the curs of Poitou barked.

"Do not call me dear heart," she snapped. "Is it for me to teach a hero how to be heroic? Is it for me to teach a husband how he should best behave when his wife is insulted in his company?"

"Indeed, I think it is not," Villon answered mildly, but with an irony in his voice which was quite lost upon the tempestuous Katherine, until

he added: "Yet it appears to me that such is the very thing you are trying to do."

Katherine bounced in her saddle with anger as she forced her palfrey further from the neighbourhood of François.

"Do not speak to me," she insisted, "do not speak to me. You have cut a fine figure to-day, to tell me what I should do or leave undone. Were I to tell you what I think of you you would not ride there so self-satisfied."

To this tirade Villon made no reply, and the pair jogged on in silence for a while, a silence that seemed only broken by the levity of the wind among the crisping summer leaves and the indistinguishable mutterings of those that followed them and that still commented below their breaths on the events of the morning. To the man and to the woman it was a time of tragedy. Katherine honestly thought, as far as her tumult of emotions could be called thinking, that she had lost all faith in, if not all love for, the man who had shown himself craven, and poor François horridly feared that his castle of magic had proved a palace of cards and was clattering about his ears in ruin. Was he to find, unlike the man in the legend, that he had married an angel who turned to monster in his arms. Still, in despite of his grief and his resentment, his native fairness recognized that in her eyes he had not played the hero yonder, and that, after all, she could not foresee, though, indeed, she might have guessed, his intentions.

In this condition of gloom the cavalcade proceeded for some while in the glowing afternoon,

the sun very strong upon the highway, the sky very blue above them, all the pigments of nature asserting themselves with fierce strength till the countryside gleamed like a prism. "Here was a day, if ever, made for happiness," Villon groaned in his heart, as he watched the angry flush on the averted cheek of his wife.

Now when they were come about to the borders of the domains of Vaucelles-les-Tours they arrived at a cross-road where four roads met, and here new matter for anger and misunderstanding awaited them. Since they had passed that same cross-road in the morning workers had been at work, and the result of their labours made the troop of riders come to a halt in astonishment. There was thick forest at their right hand, and so round the corner towards Vaucelles. But at the left the land was fairly open and green. Forth from the newly-vexed grasses to the left of the roadside rose an ugly structure of wood that had evidently been hurriedly set up since the people from Vaucelles had passed that spot earlier in the morning. Four great posts of wood had been driven deep into the earth and nailed together with cross-pieces till the whole had a sufficiently unpleasing likeness to an official gibbet. There was a rope depending from an upper beam, and at the end of the rope a figure dangled, a grotesque figure in pied garments with long shoes that pointed piteously to earth, while from the cap that concealed the head a long cock's feather pointed ironically towards heaven.

At this grim sight Katherine involuntarily drew

bridle and crossed herself, for she thought, and her thought was shared by those that rode after her, that she was actually face to face with a crime and a victim. Indeed, in the tension of her nerves she was ready enough to take sham for reality. Not so, however, her companion. Villon was too familiar with the gibbets of Montfaucon not to perceive at once that the swinging figure swayed far more readily in response to the faint summer breeze than would be possible for a pendant corpse, and he spurred forward to verify what he guessed, that the image was no more than a harmless dummy of straw. The absurd doll was, indeed, of the rudest construction. A suit of clothes of a faded finery had been roughly sewn together and roughly filled out to something of the proportions of a human body. The head under the flapping hat was nothing but a bundle of tow, and the whole effigy was, in itself, no more terrifying than a scarecrow in a field. Yet it was intended to strike terror, and its menace was made manifest in a paper that was nailed to its breast by a common skewer. Villon, leaning from his saddle, plucked this paper free and read it. It ran thus, written in a fairly clerkly script :

“ Here hangs the false lord of Montcorbier on a false gallows. Let Master François Villon take heed to it lest he swing here in good earnest at last. Poitou is no place for Paris rats.”

After this there were written in another hand, clumsy and unskilful, the words “ Begone, rogue,”

and thereafter was appended a seal in red wax, as if to give the document a formal air of weight and validity. By this time Katherine and the others had come up and were staring amazed at the dummy. Villon thrust the paper into his breast.

"Here is a jolly jest," he said cheerfully. "Who shall say that Poitou is barren of humour who sees this thing."

Then he rode leisurely forward again, and Katherine rode with him; the others following him in their order as before and staring at that swinging figure until they lost sight of it after the turn in the road to the right, when they continued to talk of it among themselves.

"What was written on that paper?" Katherine asked sourly, after they had ridden a little way in silence. When Villon told her she began to sob softly to herself, so that all her body shook as she rode. Her world of dominion seemed to be reeling into chaos.

"Do you know," François asked, "who it is that carries a coat thus: quarterly, a gold padlock on a red field of the first and third, and three black keys on a field silver of the second and fourth?"

Katherine turned on him a face dry-eyed and haggard. With an effort she controlled her sobbing.

"Such are the arms of the Lord Gontier de Grigny," she said.

Villon nodded his head. "I thought as much," he answered. Then, stirred by an ache of tender-

ness, he reached out a hand to the woman by his side, the woman who was his love, the woman who was his wife. But she struck the extended hand angrily away from her. She was wretched as one possessed by a devil; she could think of nothing but the public shame she had endured, and the man who rode by her side seemed, not her lover, not her husband, but the cause of all her humiliation, the swallower of affronts, the fellow from the kennel whom great lords hanged in effigy. François made no further effort to appease her bewildering anger, and the rest of the ride was finished in a dismal silence.

CHAPTER V.

TAKING A TRICK.

WHEN at last they reached Vaucelles-les-Tours Katherine would have none of Villon's aid to dismount. Bidding him to keep away, she flung herself free from her palfrey and entered the castle in a condition of hysteria that was little short of madness. Gathering her women about her she hastened to her own apartments, sending word to her husband that she was ill, and, needing no meat, would not sit with him at dinner.

Villon received the intelligence with an expressionless face. "If a man must eat alone, still he must eat," was his only comment; and he sat himself down in the, to him, cheerless state of the great hall, and feasted in apparent gaiety with his household and made some play with the victuals and drink. But when he had done and was alone again he summoned to his presence an old servant of the house who was held to know all that was knowable of the province of Poitou and of them that dwelt therein. Villon bade this man, Guiscard, tell him what he knew of the Lord Gontier de Grigny. The fellow extended his hands apologetically.

"The Lord Gontier of Grigny," he said, "is, in sum, the Lord Gontier of Grigny."

"So much," said Villon gravely, "I should have guessed even out of my own ignorance. Be more particular with one who did not know till to-day that there existed a Lord Gontier de Grigny, and did not think, till to-day, that the knowledge could ever interest him."

Straightway the man Guiscard began to babble information. The Lord Gontier de Grigny was a great lord of Poitou, one whose house had been standing there ever since Noah's deluge left it high and dry. They were, it seemed, a choleric race, the de Grignys, and an amorous, and a passionate, very hot to tread on the corns of any man, very quick to strike if a stray foot passed by mischance upon their shadow. The present lord was, it appeared, the epitome, or, rather, the sum of all the ancestral qualities—vainglorious, quarrelsome, amative, name-proud and purse-proud, pompous as a donkey, lascivious as a rabbit, quarrelsome as a daw, and headstrong as the father of all mules. He was now, for the second time, a widower, and had, it would seem, cherished hopes of entering for a third time into matrimony with the Lady Katherine of Vaucelles, whom he had not seen for many a long day, but whose patrimony and vast estates he ogled. It was all in the Poitevin way of thinking. Here was a great heiress of Poitou that lacked a husband. It was her obvious duty to marry a Poitevin, and what Poitevin was so important as the Lord Gontier of Grigny? Knowledge of the assiduities of the

late Thibault d'Aussigny had almost carried him to Paris and committed him to the King's cause, when news came in belated succession of the death of Thibault after a plot against the King's life and the marriage of the Lady Katherine de Vaucelles to a lord of Montcorbier, who proved, on further information, to be a rakehell devil of a rhymer named François Villon, who had been lifted by the King's whim from a thieves' kitchen to a season of dignity, and had then only escaped the gallows because he had managed to win the heart of Katherine.

François was scarcely surprised to find that under the circumstances the lord of Grigny regarded him with little favour, as an interloper and intruder. But the old resident's methods of manifesting his displeasure did not commend themselves to the new-comer; seemed, indeed, to call for immediate correction. He learned from Guiscard that the castle of Gontier lay some leagues off on the further side of Poitiers and at about as great a distance from the castle of Vaucelles-les-Tours. He further learned that it was more than probable that the lord of Grigny would dine that day with the bishop, as was his custom on most Sundays of the year. As for the bishop himself, Villon learned, something to his surprise, that his name was Thibault d'Aussigny and that he was a near kinsman of Villon's old enemy. "Really a very disagreeable family," said Villon with a sour smile. After feasting with the bishop for a pair of hours or so the lord of Grigny would ride home in the peace of the evening, well fed,

well drunken, with his tail of men behind him to the number of perhaps a dozen, never more, seeing the tranquillity of Poitou.

Villon had learned promptitude in action since life had offered him better pastime than the cud-dling of wenches, the draining of pots, and the picking of locks. Within a quarter of an hour of Guiscard's story he was galloping from the castle at the head of five-and-twenty well-armed, well-mounted fighting men, along the road that led to the castle of Grigny. He had not sought speech of Katherine since she had retired to her room in dudgeon. Any words he might have to say would be better said later, if fate gave him breath to say them. Wherefore he galloped his hardest along the high road with his valiants clattering behind him, and Katherine did not know of his departure until he was long out of sight and hearing.

Villon did not know the way to the castle of Grigny, so by his side rode an old soldier of Vaucelles, named Bertran, that was now a kind of pensioner of the house, but one that could still ride a horse as well and wield a weapon almost as well as ever. He it was that pointed out to his leader such by-roads as were passable that abbreviated the journey; he it was that, learning Villon's desire to make ambuscade somewhere midway between Poitiers and Grigny, suggested the very spot where the road, narrowing, was commanded on one side by a thickish clump of wood and on the other by a little elevation on which the ruined walls of a destroyed farm-

house afforded excellent cover for cross-bowmen. Thither, therefore, the party aimed, and there they arrived within forty minutes of the time when they had streamed out of the gateway of Vaucelles-les-Tours.

Even one more inexperienced in strategy than Villon—who, after all, knew his Cæsar excellently well—must have perceived that the ground chosen was admirable for his purpose. Dismounting his party he had the horses led into the depths of the little wood that walled the road on one side, and carefully tethered there. Twelve of his men he concealed behind tree trunks and behind some piles of lopped wood, which served as efficient screens ready to his hand. Eleven more he hid behind the ruined walls that fringed the little hill on the other side of the road. The twelfth man was despatched to proceed with speed and caution in the direction of Poitiers and ordered to return at the double as soon as he could get sight of the expected quarry.

These preparations completed, Villon and the old squire Bertran sat down by the roadside and waited on events. To while away the time Villon asked his companion what was the reason for the presence of those shattered straggling walls along the hill upon whose slopes they were resting.

“Those stones tell a sad story,” said the old soldier pensively. “There was one here that had a fair wife. When the lord of Grigny saw her beauty he coveted her and sent for her, that she should come to his castle. But the husband—I know not, perhaps he was mad—denied him,

and when my lord sent again, more peremptory, made so bold as to slay his messenger. Where-upon my lord came down upon him like a cloud full of rain, but the door was barred, and when they beat the door in there lay a dead woman and there stood a living man whom they could not take alive; he fought so fiercely, to the great rage and discomfiture of the lord of Grigny. Then, to make manifest his anger, he set fire to the place, and those blackened walls are all that are left of what was once a pleasant dwelling. Well, well, folk should not withstand great lords."

Villon's easy susceptibilities were already aroused. He could, as he sat there on the bare hill-side, weep tears of salt water for the comely dead woman and tears of warm blood for the foolhardy lover that died so bravely to save her from that wine-sack, that gross goat, that pulp of lust, the Lord Gontier of Grigny. He was as flushed with championship of virtue as if he had never been himself, and for the moment he forgot his own private quarrel with the lord of Grigny in his longing to avenge the wrong which had ended in blood and fire that while ago on the hill-side where he sat.

Now, on this melancholy of meditation, back came the scout, breathing hard and brimmed with news. Their quarry was coming towards them in trim for snaring, the lord of Grigny ahead, swaying a little in his saddle and singing to himself, and at his heels no more than ten men that had plainly taken more drink than they could carry with ease.

No more than ten men. Here was good news indeed for Villon and for Bertran as they leaped to their feet. The old squire was instantly ready with his plan, which was, that as soon as their enemy came within the narrowed way his bowmen should shoot down the whole party unawares, with the exception of the lord of Grigny, with whom he vaguely understood that his master desired to deal in person. But his master, to the old squire's chagrin, would have none of this scheme. His orders were that the men should keep close while he and he alone waited in the roadstead to bar his foeman's way. When he raised his hand his archers were to emerge from cover of wood and wall and make it plain to their adversaries that they were outnumbered by little less than three to one. If at this point the folk of Grigny did not do as François bade them, why then, but then only, François would give the word, and then it was each archer's duty to see that his quarrel bit its target.

Along the road came the lord of Grigny, a red man on a red horse, bawling a lewd song. Behind him came his men-at-arms, riding in loose order and much flustered with drink. Master and men they were all as ripe for a bushment as ever fools were in the world. Gontier was some yards ahead of his followers when he came to the narrow place in the road, between the wood and the hill, and here Villon stepped forth from his hiding and barred his way, holding up his hand in sign that the rider should come to a halt.

In his surprise at this sudden appearance the

lord of Grigny did stop, tugging at the reins of the red horse and staring at his stayer under his stretched hand, for the sun was something in his eyes, in more senses than one, and he did not see very clearly what it was that hindered his journey. Indeed, he was taken so completely unawares that even when he had discerned that it was a man who bade him stand he did not for a while recognize the man so as to put a name to him. But Villon called to him in a loud voice, crying: "O Gontier, lord of Grigny, get off from your horse, for you and I must have a talk together." Then Gontier of Grigny knew who he was, and he cursed at him, for Gontier always grew choleric with his drink, and called him a gutter ruffian and told him to quit the road or else he would ride him down. And, indeed, he made to urge his horse forward against Villon where he stood.

Now by this time those that were in the train of Grigny had well-nigh come up with their leader, and had made a halt too, wondering to see their lord thus engaged in a parley on the high road, and these, seeing their lord about to advance, were for moving forward likewise. But at this instant Villon lifted again his hand and his voice, and forth from their covert in the wood and their shelter behind walls, arose the ambuscaders, their four-and-twenty crossbows levelled, the strings strained, and the bolts snug in their channels. Now while the lord of Grigny and his fellows started at that unexpected menace, Villon again commanded them to halt and hearken or else they were all dead men, and he warned them that if

they made any sign of resistance he would bid his archers discharge their arrows. There was no doubt about it; the threatened men were in a trap and lay very plainly at the mercy of their adversaries. Gontier glared at Villon in a rage of hate.

"What do you want with me, thief?" he shrieked, for he was a fierce man, and though he found himself snared he would scorn to pick civil words. He was at no time a quick thinker and his wits were now muddy with liquor: he was dimly wondering why his opponent had not taken his life and the lives of those that were with him when it was so easy to do so.

"Lord of Grigny," Villon answered with urbanity, "I have wished for speech with you since this morning. At our first meeting the conditions were all in your favour and I was compelled, with reluctance, to dance to your tune. Now our fortunes are the other way about and it is I who call the music and the measure."

Gontier, choking with an embarrassment of oaths, was forced to admit that his despised enemy was in a position to dictate terms. If he provoked a conflict by hurling himself upon the Parisian the chances were almost certainties that his band would be promptly blown out of the battle by a rain of arrows, and he himself—he, the lord of Grigny—would be helpless in the mesh of his enemies, even if one of the bolts did not find its billet in his bulk. While he spluttered and stutted blasphemies Villon shouted to those that were with Gontier to descend from their horses

and to fling their weapons at their feet. The men glanced at their master, but their master had nothing to say; then they glanced at the shining line of arbalests and recognized the dictates of fate. Sullenly they dismounted; sullenly they flung their weapons at their feet. Villon then bade them back their horses a little way, and when they were well clear of the little pile of surrendered weapons, a dozen of the fellows from Vaucelles, with Bertran for their leader, emerged from wood or descended from hill and advanced upon their defenceless foes. In a few minutes every man of Gontier's was trussed like a fowl, with a stout sapling under his knees and over his arms and his wrists well knotted together in front of his shin-bones. Thus dismissed from the fighting line they were conveyed into the recesses of the wood, where, deftly gagged, they were left squatting on their haunches to consider, inarticulate, the whimsical chances of existence.

In the meantime the lord of Grigny and the lord of Vaucelles were carrying on an animated dialogue.

"You kennel-kin," screamed the Bull-face, when he realized at last that blasphemies afforded him no tittle of consolation, "you spawn of Paris mud, you picker of locks, you breaker of bolts, you brothel-bird, you shall hang for this if I have art or part in the governance of Poitou."

Villon answered him very pleasantly, for, indeed, he could afford to be pleasant. His trap had snapped upon his rat; the rat was alone in a ring of armed men who were grinning at their master's victory, and ten excellent horses were being led

into the depths of the little wood to be tethered there out of harm's way for the present.

"Gontier of Grigny," said Villon, "you have been polite enough to hang me once already to-day, in effigy it is true, but the deed still is grimly emblematic of your friendly intentions. Now you are, as I think, my prisoner, to do with as I please. The odds were blithely on your side when you flouted me and mine in church and square; the odds are on my side now, and you are but one man to six-and-twenty. Yet because I, whom you call base-born, am a better fellow than you, who style yourself high-born and think yourself of kin to God's angels, no one of whom would shed a wing-feather to save you from shame, I will, by my honour and out of my generosity, give you a fighting chance to turn the luck. Get off your horse, pluck out your iron, and if you get the better of me you shall ride hence with the honours of war."

The lord of Grigny glared at him and the veins on the forehead of the bull-face swelled with rage.

"Measure weapons with you," he growled, "a nobody, a skip-jack, a palming rascal, a scab, with no more than a slut's shift for coat-armour! Is a lord of Grigny to measure weapons with you?"

"If a lord of Grigny is not to measure weapons with me," said Villon very calmly, for hard words break no bones, and one that had been free of the liberties of the Court of Miracles could have easily overtopped Gontier in a duel of epithets, to say

nothing of a spice of scholarship to make a filthy phrase sting ; “ if a lord of Grigny is not to measure weapons with me, then I very devoutly fear that a lord of Grigny will very speedily be not better than so much senseless clay with a great many arrow-holes in it. It is fight or fall, I promise you, so hop off that red horse of yours, Bull-face, before it be too late.”

Now, in thus valiantly challenging the lord of Grigny, François was obeying the final impulse of warring emotions. Villon the shifty, Villon the prudent, Villon the worldly-cunning, had his enemy at his mercy ; he could do with him what he wished to do, for there was no gainsaying, for a single man, the arguments of four-and-twenty stout fellows with crossbows. But François the romantic, the fantastic, with a fair wife and a fire-new title, had a thing called honour to uphold, and it was essential to the satisfaction of that same hungry honour that the patrician should be forced to cross swords with the plebeian. Villon was well aware of the risk he ran in the business. He was, truly, as good a swordsman as any in Paris, for he had learnt the art, together with some skill at the crossbow, from an old soldier of Lahire, one that had served the Maid and that nightly drank himself to sleep in praising her grace and damning her enemies. He had tested his courage, too, under exalting conditions, and found it serviceable in the little Burgundian scuffles. Also he was of good strength, quick address, and exceedingly nimble. But the Lord Gontier of Grigny was little less than a giant. He was tall and broad

and thick, with legs like trees, and mighty arms of unusual length, which gave him a much-to-be-dreaded gift of reach in delivering blows. Had they been pitted unarmed man to unarmed man Gontier could have squeezed the breath out of Villon's body with his gripped fingers, or broken his bones as easily as he could snap a dry twig. And even with each man holding a sword in his hand the contest seemed as ridiculously unequal as a battle between a bear and a cat. True that Villon had fought with and overcome a foe almost as big when he fought with Thibault d'Aussigny; but in that combat the conditions had been equalized by the lantern-lit darkness in which the contest had been fought. Here in the clear light of a summer afternoon there would be no such advantage, and it seemed, on the face of things, that the lord of Grigny had but to strike a blow or two and brush the new lord of Montcorbier out of his gentility for good and all.

But in yielding obedience to the spur of his honour, and insisting on his enemy according him the knightly privilege of the duel, Villon was not acting with mere foolhardiness. That old soldier of Lahire's, who had taught the clerk of Paris sword-play and bow-play, had so loved his impish pupil that he showed him certain secret tricks and sleights of sword-work such as were known to few, and such as served on occasion to equalize the fighting chances of a big man and a little man. It was on one of these same secret strokes that François now relied to help him out of his adventure.

The inequality of the contest was as plain to

the lord of Grigny as it was to Villon, and it seemed to him that it would not be troublesome to make short work of an unwelcome intruder. So he swung himself off his red horse, and Bertran ran forward and took charge of it.

"Now listen, lord of Grigny," cried François, when he saw that his enemy was willing to contend with him, "this is no killing-quarrel. I have no such hate of you that I cannot breathe the air in peace while you live, nor can you have such hate of me. Whichever of us, therefore, is rendered by his adversary incapable of carrying on the combat shall yield him prisoner to the other, and pay him such fine, forfeit, or ransom as the victor shall demand."

"Who are you," grunted the lord of Grigny, "to lay down laws of combat for me?"

"I am the man," Villon answered briskly, "who holds this pass, and I make my terms by right of triumph, and they are the old terms and laws that governed chivalrous encounters in the days of old."

François spoke largely, his mind humming with gaudy memories of knightly tales that he had read long ago in the meagre library of his uncle the canon. There is a mental intoxication as well as a physical, and Villon swam in that roseate ether for this many a day. Ironical fact derided him in vain, iterating his squalid past, his pinchbeck present, but the whimsical ape would have none of these verities. He was Katherine's lover, he was Katherine's husband; such an one must needs be a paladin and overtumble giants. And

François' was that happy nature which, if it accomplished success by a dodge, was ready to transmute in the crucible of his humour the livid lead of a shift into the very gold of a heroism.

Gontier of Grigny replied to his mouthings with a volley of curses which tried to combine the blasphemous with the obscene in equal proportions for a sonorous whole. He failed in this, for he was not an artist, but a plain, rough, angry bully. Villon smiled compassionately at the poverty of a giant's invention. How he could have outsworn the blunderer in his graceless days. But he had little time for smiling. The lord of Grigny had his sword out and was making him ready for his anticipated business of slicing his adversary as easily as a maid may slice a radish.

But Villon was ready for him with weapon out and alert, and the two blades met with a bang. The swords were single-handed, not the terrible two-handed war-swords, but they were heavy, formidable weapons, such as should have had shields to support them. Villon felt the weight of his opponent's brawn and muscle in the swashing stroke that he countered, and was warned by it to lose no time in putting his sleight into practice. The manner of it was something thuswise. A gliding blow culminating in force on the sword near the adversary's hand with the effect of jarring the sinews and weakening the finger-grip, was instantly followed by such a locking of assailant blade with assailed blade and hilt as must almost inevitably result in the wrenching of the hostile brand from the antagonist's grasp or the snapping

of the steel at the hilt. It was more of a juggler's trick, after all, than straight swordsmanship; more a matter for wide-mouthed wonder at a fair than for the courtesy of the lists. But Villon was playing to win, slight man against giant, and was not for sticking at trifles. He tried his sleight at once, quickly and carefully, almost mathematically nice in his calculation, amazingly rapid in the act. The grip of the lord of Grigny was not to be unhinged, but steel yielded where flesh was stubborn, and Gontier's blade, snapped at the hilt, clattered at his feet.

Then, "Prisoner," shouted Villon, and in a trice half a dozen of his following leaped from coppice and hill and flung themselves upon Gontier. As a wild boar in his fury struggles with the encompassing dogs, tossing them this way and that, so the fierce lord of Grigny struggled with his assailants and struggled in vain. He was a match for any three of them; he was a match for any six; he was not a match for any eight, for any ten, for any twelve, when other archers dropped their bows and reinforced their struggling comrades. There were some wild moments of trampling and blows and oaths and troubled dust, and then an end, with the lord of Grigny captive, his arms bound tightly behind him and a dozen hands keeping him still. He raved like a maniac, cursing François for a felon and threatening illimitable revenge. But Villon paid him no heed. Why should he? He had won his game.

Calling old Bertran to his side he bade him ride with half the party to Vaucelles-les-Tours

and summon the Lady Katherine to ride forth at once with that escort and meet her husband at the cross-roads, those same cross-roads where they had found the silly image swinging. The squire, who knew something of women, hesitated.

"How if she will not come?" he suggested, after a deprecatory cough.

Villon stroked his thin cheeks. He could not help feeling vexed with Katherine.

"Say it is my will; nay, that it is my entreaty. Reason with her, plead with her, but in the end she must come."

The old squire nodded; then, after Villon had told him to bring ink-horn and quill on his return, he gathered half the troop about him and was off at a hand-gallop in the direction of Vaucelles. Next, Villon bade bring forward the big red horse, and on to his back they hoisted, willy-nilly, the blaspheming lord of Grigny, to whose oaths, ejaculations and insults Villon paid no more heed than he would to a belated linnet chirping on a twig. His own horse being brought to him he mounted and made off at an even pace towards the cross-roads, followed by his people with the lord of Grigny in their midst.

CHAPTER VI.

A GALLOWS BIRD:

FOR a while the conquered lord of Grigny loudly vociferated imprecations on his captor. Then finding that Villon paid no heed and gave no answer, he took to threatening the men-at-arms with his vengeance and tempting them with his favour, unless or if they loosed his bonds and set him free. Villon could rely well enough upon his men that were right Paris rascals, strangers to Poitou, and recked no penny piece of the lord of Grigny. None the less, he warned Gontier that he should be incontinently gagged if he continued to sing in that strain. Thereupon the prisoner settled into a sullen silence, which he maintained for the rest of the ride. The little party met no one on the road, for the ways around Vaucelles were lonely save in the immediate neighbourhood of Poitiers. Had they met anyone Villon was ready to take charge that his prisoner neither bleated nor mewed, nor neighed nor yelped, nor lowed nor whinnied. But, as was said, they met no one, and the Lord Gontier of Grigny was not tempted to break the silence of his resignation.

Nor did he break it until the cavalcade began to slacken speed at that point of cross-roads where a little earlier in the day our François had faced his iconic parody swinging from the gibbet. The horrid doll still swung there, more hideous in the evening light, that seemed to accentuate its obscene eccentricities. Here Villon waited and drew rein, with a slight smile on his face. And as he smiled the lord of Grigny began to bluster, guessing desperately at his enemy's intention, and insisting volubly on his prisoner's right to ransom and honourable treatment. Villon turned in his saddle and grinned at the angry gentleman.

"Respected sir," he began with ironic suavity, "when you were pleased to set me a-spinning here in effigy you should have reflected that one man's game is two men's game, and that the same gallows can swing more than one kind of meat."

Therewith Villon gave order that the dummy should be plucked from its place to make room for a new pendulum. The lord of Grigny, prophesying ill things for himself, protested noisily, but nobody heeded him, and while he bawled, cursed, threatened, begged and imprecated the thing of straw was whisked from its rope and flung into the ditch. Then the Lord Gontier of Grigny was dragged forward on his red horse, struggling as much as he could, and placed in position under the cross-beam of the gibbet, and the unfastened noose of rope was adjusted in such a way under his arms and around his chest as, when all was finished, to leave him dangling, uncomfortably enough, but still at no peril to his bull-neck. He

foamed and mouthed and swore much, all to unheeding ears, and when the strappings and knottings and adjustments were completed they pulled his red horse from between his legs and left him swinging with his feet far sundered from his Mother Earth and a straining ache at his shoulder-blades.

There rang a clatter of hooves on the highway, and in another instant Katherine came in sight, galloping full-speed on her palfrey, with the squire and his twelve men thundering along behind her. As soon as she saw Villon, who moved forward a little ways to greet her, she questioned him angrily why he had sent for her, and yet under the anger in her voice there was no little of anxiety and no less of alarm.

François did not pause to inquire by what arguments the squire had persuaded his lady to obey his summons. In answer to her question he caught at her horse's bridle and led her in silence directly in front of the unpleasantly familiar gallows with its pleasantly unfamiliar fruit.

For a moment Katherine stared speechless at the whimsical apparition. Meanwhile Villon had turned to Bertran, that had carried from the castle, as he bade, an ink-horn and a quill at his girdle, and reversing the parchment which he had picked from the make-believe of himself, began to write in the now slowly waning light. And this is what he wrote :

“ Here swingeth the eminent Bull-face of Grigny, Gontier the red-headed, suspended thus by order of his liege and suzerain, François de Corbeuil,

lord of Montcorbier, as a warning to all other blockheads, packasses, malthorses, zanies, ninnies and noodles whatsoever."

He was just stringing this rigmarole around the neck of his victim, when Katherine gave way. The monstrous bulk of the lord of Grigny, his purple jowls, his mop of red hair, his angry piggish eyes and snarling piggish mouth, all seemed so grotesque as they dangled there from the beam of the gibbet that after a moment's astonished silence Katherine broke out into a paroxysm of laughter, peal on peal, while she swayed in her saddle with the vehemence of her mirth. It was largely hysterical, her hilarity, and when she was able to make an end there were tears in her eyes, and it was with a quivering mouth and a penitent hush that she turned and addressed her husband.

"My dear lord," she said gently, "here is a gallant tit for tat, and I think the Roland of Vaucelles overcrows the Oliver of Grigny. Let the jest end here and now. My lord there has been very unneighbourly, and you have taught him a lesson which we would beg him to take to heart. Let him go now, in God's name, with no more hurt, for, indeed, I think that the laughter lies on our side of the hedge."

François looked from his lady's lovely face to the dangling anger, and back again from the dangling anger to his lady's lovely face, and shook with jolly laughter, swaying on his saddle. For he was glad to see kindness again in Katherine's

eyes that had of late been so cruel, and to hear sweetness from Katherine's lips that had of late been so sour, and he was tickled at the swift discomfiture and humiliation of Bull-face, and the ridiculous figure he now cut as the pendant of a gibbet, and a gibbet, too, that was of his own making. Then when he had laughed till he was tired he reached forward and caught Katherine's hand and pulled the riding-glove from it and kissed her fingers very lovably and courteous.

"It shall be as you say, Kate," he declared. Then he turned to the trussed ruffian who hung between his beams like a gross turkey strung in a roasting-jack.

"Messire Bull-face," he said, "I was of a mind to leave you here all night, not to ease my heart of any grudge I have against you, for I care nothing what you think of me and less what you say of me, and as for what you may seek to do to me, I will, with God's help, take charge to meet that. But I would have left you here to punish you for playing the hog towards a fair and gracious lady, who honours this province by choosing to live in it. But since that same lady, out of her fairness and her grace, has been pleased to pardon your swinishness it is scarcely for me to gainsay her."

Drawing his sword as he spoke he sliced at the rope above Gontier's head and severed it. There was but a little way to drop, a matter of perhaps a yard, and as the legs of the lord of Grigny were not fettered he might very well have alighted on his feet. But he somehow missed his footing and ended by sprawling on his knees, as if fortune

had forced him to an attitude of supplication before an offended but forgiving lady. Villon roared again with laughter, in which his soldiers joined heartily, while even Katherine had some ado to keep her countenance.

Presently, when he had laughed his fill, Villon bade the squire and another help the lord of Grigny to regain his feet, which he had thus far been hindered from doing by reason of his bulk. When they had set him on his legs again, he further ordered them to unloose the captive, and while they did so, Villon, with his sword still out, kept a wary eye upon his enemy, lest in his rage he might make a rush like a bull and seek, unarmed as he was and with such odds against him, to do mischief. But the lord of Grigny took his freedom in silence and in quiet. Without a word he stalked to where his red horse waited, scrambled into the saddle, and as soon as his legs were around the beast's belly he gave it the spur and in another instant was galloping furiously in the direction of Grigny.

As soon as he was out of sight old Bertran turned to François with words of wisdom.

"It were best we rode to Vaucelles briskly. Yonder lord will now liberate his rascals in the wood, and who knows but he may be mad enough to come clattering after us in the hope to do us some hurt. We are two to one, it is true, but now we have a woman with us, wherefore the odds are on the other side."

Villon found his counsel sage. Taking Katherine's palfrey by the bridle he turned the animal round and started it on a brisk canter towards home.

He rode close by Katherine's side and they were both silent as they clove the deepening glooms of the evening. But the silence was one of happiness, not of anger, and he knew that tears were softening the brightness of his lady's eyes, and that smiles were on her lips. Behind the pair rode the little company of men-at-arms, laughing blithely among themselves at the way in which the lord of Grigny had been served.

All the evening Katherine was exquisite in tenderness and penitence, praising Villon more with glance of eye and touch of hand than with the spoken word. François found it hard to realize that this quintessence of sweetness could have played the shrew so tartly so short a while ago. Perhaps, as was said, he had known too many women to know much about women; perhaps he had deified Katherine free of the inevitables of womanhood. If he were wiser now, he tried to forget his wisdom in yielding to the delicate allurements of his companion. She wooed him to woo her. She kissed him till it seemed as if he had never yet known the magic of her kiss. In passionate surrender she seemed to ask and surely got forgiveness for her sin of shrewishness, and the summer moon through the open window of their chamber blessed with her pale radiance a pair of lovers for whom the world seemed very young, and they, as the first man and the first woman, eating of the first fruit.

CHAPTER VII.

A LULL IN THE STORM.

A DAY of storm is often ended by a sunset of splendour, a horizon all pomp and colour, the sky a field of calm. But the peace of the heavens, the glory of the sunset, may prove the prelude to tempests. Our François had weathered his first storm, had escaped the hurricane, and was as happy in the sunset as if a sunset was the symbol of eternity. If his eyes had been opened he lowered their lids again, and, as it were, closed his fingers upon his dreams.

The news of the humiliation of the lord of Grigny spread over Poitou, Upper and Lower, as a fire spreads in a dry wood of pines. It was Upper Poitou that had sided with Gontier and showed its teeth in the Cathedral of Poitiers. Lower Poitou, with its own chief town of Fontenay, cared not a rap for the lord of Grigny and the gentility that took their time from him. So Lower Poitou merely chuckled over the episode, rather enjoying than regretting the discomfiture of Gontier, and resenting less than the Upper Poitevins the in-

trusion of Villon, seeing that the lands and appanages of Vaucelles lay in the upper slice of the province.

But Upper Poitou was stirred to the core by the business. The demonstration in the Cathedral, that had been meant to extinguish the pretensions of the stranger, had been balanced and overbalanced by the exploit of the adventurer from Paris. The Poitevins were so furious that they could find no consolation in their goose-pies and had no delight in wine: though they sucked it by the hogshead they sucked thereout no advantage. The vexation of vexations was that there seemed to be nothing to do to set matters right again, snub the intruder, and restore the Poitevins to their conceit.

The lord of Grigny, indeed, was for making a raid upon Vaucelles with all the forces that the united nobility of Upper Poitou could rally. But on this point the nobility of Upper Poitou declined to be united. There were several reasons for this lack of union. In the first place it was pointed out that it was easier to talk of a raid upon Vaucelles than to carry it out. Vaucelles was easily the first stronghold in the province; its walls and towers a defiance in stone; not more defiant a granite mountain. It was garrisoned not only by the small army of retainers that formed the natural retinue of any suzerain of the castle, but, further, by the little body of troops that Villon had brought with him from Paris after the peace, a levy of merry devils who would do anything for their captain and did not

care a pig's whisper for the indignation of the Poitevins. The nobility of Poitou had always been small fry in comparison with the lords-paramount of Vaucelles, and if they armed every jack-man of their following they could not muster a force with any pretence to menace a fortress whose walls would grin at their artillery, if they had any, and, as a matter of fact, they had none.

Besides this, it was further urged that since the peace of Conflans, Louis, eleventh of his name, was still at least nominally king, that he was not entirely a neglectable quantity, and that to make open war upon a King's man in a time of public peace might have results both unexpected and unpleasant. This argument had force enough to stifle for the time even the ire of the bishop, who did not love the King but had intelligence enough to appreciate, if dimly, that Louis was still an individual to be feared.

But behind all these reasonable reasons there lay the reason which was the most reasonable of all, which plied in the minds of all though no man gave it tongue. This was dislike of Gontier of Grigny. Gontier was too much of a bully, too much a snapper at other men's wives, other men's sisters, other men's daughters, other men's sweethearts, too much of a trampler on the rights, too much a snatcher of the goods of weaker folk, to have won great popularity among his neighbour nobles, or to make them over zealous to take up arms in his quarrel. They argued speciously among themselves that the matter had now resolved itself into being Gontier's quarrel. The Upper

Poitevins had done their part in asserting the dignity of the province. Their resentment had been expressed—and how eloquently—by the bishop. If thereafter Gontier chose to fall into a trap set by his enemy, and to cut a ridiculous figure on his own gibbet, that was his private affair and did not touch the public honour of Poitou. So they said to one another in counsel, wagging their heads. What they did not proclaim was the secret satisfaction they all felt at the humiliation of de Grigny. They spoke him fair, deplored the outrage, voiced the wish that something indefinite could be done, pointed out clearly that nothing definite could, at that time, be done; and all the while they were merry in their hearts because of the trick that Villon had played upon him.

The lord of Grigny was conscious of some such smouldering fires; he did not find the old deference on men's faces, and it was not until he half strangled the unhappy Seneschal of Viroflay in the outskirts of Poitiers for daring to stand on his shadow and then capped this action by flinging his victim into the river, from which the Seneschal was fished with difficulty, that he restored his supremacy in at least its outer dignity. For undoubtedly he was the strongest man in all that part, and as ready to pick quarrels as to pick plums.

But if the cautious Poitevins were agreed that it would be both idle and unwise to take overt action against the grim hold of Vaucelles, they were also agreed that no civility should be shown, no courtesy offered to the lord and lady of the castle. The King might, if he chose, pick a

rascallion from the Court of Miracles, and stick a title on his head, just as he might stick a feather in the cap of some vagabond's monkey whose dancing antics amused him. But he could not make the nobility of Poitou recognize that title or clasp hands with its wearer.

As for the lady of the castle, why, their mind was no kinder to her. Truly Katherine de Vaucelles represented the oldest, noblest, stateliest, wealthiest line in all Poitou; truly she carried on her comely shoulders a quantity of titles. But she had cancelled all her grandeur by her marriage, just as she would have stained her white body if she had chosen to take a bath of ink. The King might confirm her in the holdings of her race; he could not compel one lord to bend his head in a reverence, one lady to dip skirts in a curtsy, at her passage. She should be sent to Tours, to use the popular phrase of Poitiers, which, in its avowed disdain and hidden jealousy of a sister city, implied an isolation from all human community, a denial of all human rights. So far they went heartily with the lord of Grigny; so far, but in spite of his teeth, not a jot farther, for the nonce.

Villon, on his side of the stile, had not been idle. He did not know enough of the honest Poitevin bonnets to plumb the depths of their caution, their prudence, their looking ahead, their looking behind, their wariness in the turning of a corner, to guess that they would stomach with patience, not to say complaisance, the ignominy inflicted upon the lord of Grigny, who seemed to be at once their belly and all their members. So he saw to the discipline

and equipment of his little army ; established an elaborate system of scouts along the frontiers of the dominions of Vaucelles, and, generally speaking, enjoyed himself very heartily through the six days of a week.

For Katherine was all kindness again ; her wit was like a never-troubled sea ; and she took and gave kisses like a hungry child or a dealer in benevolences. Never was marriage-moon so rich in honey as this. Surely all the love-bees must have garnered their sweets for these two, from the meadows of dreams where the shades of the lovers of old time wander, body clinging to body, mouth pressed on mouth, and breathe as they walk the magic of the asphodels of desire. No baron rode from Poitiers to vex his pleasure ; Gontier sulked behind his turrets like a hermit. Villon, left in peace, loved and was loved to his heart's content, and had no time for rhyming. "Bah," he said apologetically to his Muse, "it is better to live a ballade of passion than to write a ballade of sighs."

Villon was all for a demonstration in the Cathedral on the coming Sabbath, but here Katherine differed from him in a degree.

"If I go," she said, "and see again those faces of hate and disdain, I shall think thoughts unfit for thinking in a House of God. I shall want to strike at them, as I wanted to strike at them last Sunday. I can keep my temper as well as another, I thank Heaven"—here Villon, putting up his hand under pretext to stifle a cough, made a little apish grimace which Katherine did not see—"but

I am a human woman with a human woman's tongue, and I would not brawl near a church."

"Why, sweeting," cried Villon, with that cheery, soldierly bluntness which it pleased him now and then to wear since he had served a king, and which, after all, became him well enough, for he was a born play-actor; "why, sweeting, as to that, I think there will be no need for brawling. Do but come with me that we may set things right some trifle, and cut a better figure, and after that I care not if we never set foot in foolish goose-fed Poitiers again."

Katherine laughed; Katherine consented, but when Katherine questioned him as to what he meant to do her spouse became a copy of the God Harpocrates. All he would say was that he had taken order for a condition of things that should be very different from its predecessor, and Katherine, who was as full of submission as of love all that week, questioned him no further, but prepared herself with meekness to obey. But behind her caresses and her surrenders Villon was conscious that another Katherine lay, as it were, in ambush, a Katherine that was not the Katherine of his passion.

He did not relish the apparition of that Katherine, for when it appeared it seemed to bring with it a brother shadow that wore ragged clothes and tangled hair and foul linen; that drank from any flagon and drabbed with any doxy; that slept in tavern angles through hours of drunkenness; a thing whose fingers pillaged, filched and pilfered when and where they could; a creature that once he saw

whenever he stared into a mirror. For that creature had the gift of wit in his brain, and the spirit of song in his body, that brought him enjoyment, the enjoyment of observation, the enjoyment of creation that exalted him like a king in his world of robbers and doxies. It was this creature that showed its teeth at him, and grinned, and lolled its tongue and pointed its finger when a girl-goddess skipped from her pedestal and played the vixen. It would suck its jaws and whistle a dirge over dreams, and then it would whisper to him that women were all alike, sometimes worth the winning, never worth the keeping. But Villon would shut his ears.

CHAPTER VIII.

“HARK, HARK, THE DOGS DO BARK.”

NOT long after the Sunday morning dawned, and hours before the summer air was sweetened by the beating of the holy bells, there came a strange migration into Poitou. Along all the roads that led from the countryside to Poitiers moved odd processions of men, women, and children, the poorest, the most pinched, the raggedest, the most woe-begone that could well emphasize by strong contrast the serenity of a well-fed civilization. Mixed with these sorry creatures moved others of less desperate condition, such as vagabond mountebanks in shabby finery, with a string of apes in leash, sturdy fellows lugging bears after them in tether and singing the queer songs of their calling, or swarthy gipsies with fortune-telling eyes and fortune-serving fingers. Besides these trooped numbers of professional beggars, blatantly advertising their maladies, some on crutches, some in go-carts, some that were mere trunks set in a bowl, and that yet could, with the aid of sticks under their arms, propel themselves along the ground with remarkable velocity.

It was for all the world as if some fantastic fair

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were being held in Poitiers, a fair for all forms of poverty, all forms of cheating, all forms of disease, a veritable rag fair where the rags were the scraps and tatters of humanity. The country-folk that were early in the fields stared under shading palms while the grotesque legions hobbled by, as if bound for some Witches' Sabbath; then crossed themselves and shuddered as they turned to their work again. But the cripples and the mendicants, the mumpers and the mummers, went on their way, so many streams of poverty and ugliness and misery and cunning that flooded with their joined volume the streets that led to the Cathedral at Poitiers before ever a bell had begun to ring for the bidding of the faithful.

The space in front of the Cathedral was lined with men-at-arms when the earliest of the tattered contingents arrived before the church—men-at-arms with faces and bearings unfamiliar to the gaping burgesses who craned from window and stared from door at the amazing invasion of their ancient city. The soldiers were under the command of a veteran, and he, as each batch of lame or ragged wretches arrived, shepherded them dexterously into the great vacant Cathedral where, by the orders of this same veteran, they were made to take possession of every seat whereon the nobility of Poitiers, male and female, were wont to place their ample persons. The servants of the church, helpless in the presence of this unexpected multitude, attempted some protests. They might as well have protested against the march of time. Without paying the least atten-

tion to their complaints the soldiers went on with their work of packing the body of the church with ragged citizens of the world—highway scarecrows, cripples, gipsies, pickpockets, every kind of ragamuffin.

Never had such a congregation been gathered together before within those walls that now clipped in their embrace the tragedy and the comedy of vagabondage. There, where the Upper Poitevins were wont to plume themselves in glory of cloth of gold and tissue of silver, in silks and stuffs of all tinctures, ruby and purple, amber and azure, murrey and green, with furs of cost and chains of price, and pomp of jewels, with all the magnificence and all the pride of peacocks, squatted a horde of shabby tramps, ill-smelling, rich only in filth, their stinking rags glued to their skins by the sweats of age-long fellowship—a shabby band. Save on the spaces where the humbler folk of Poitiers gathered to kneel and pray there was no perching-place, as it were, in the church that was not occupied by these sinister birds of passage.

Nay, there was one further and significant exception. A certain area in the neighbourhood of the stall where the lords of Vaucelles had paid their devotions for generations was left untenanted, the self-same area that had been left untenanted on the preceding Sabbath to emphasise the hostility of the people of Poitou. This space was jealously held empty by a ring of soldiers. And still the ragged and the wretched kept pouring into the Cathedral, and now the bells were beating out their lovely summons, and affrighted minor clerics

were seeking wildly their superiors, and conveying pretty generally to all whom they came across in their perturbed errand that the end of the world was undoubtedly close at hand.

A plump burgess standing in his doorway near the Cathedral space and watching the misshapen, dismal stream drift by him, stretched out a sturdy arm and brought to a halt one of the least repulsive of the grisly crew.

"What a Peter," he questioned, "are all you gentry doing in Poitiers the morning? Do you think there is a beggars' fair toward, that you trip so nimbly?"

The man he thus addressed was a brawny, bulky fellow, a very giant, one that, to outward seeming, suffered from neither malady nor deformity save for a scar on his left brow, but looked like one that would rather cadge abroad than work at home; one that would liefer tramp the highways than ply a within-doors trade; one that it might be more ill than well to meet in the grey of the evening or the grey of the morning when nobody was about. The giant paused in his course readily enough and answered with a like readiness.

"Bully burgess, it has been bruited abroad these five days through the length and breadth of Poitou, that there would be a dole to all poor folk that attended service in the Cathedral of Poitiers on this blessed Sunday as ever is, so, faith, we come for our pickings."

The man whom the tramp addressed as bully burgess gave a whistle of surprise.

"A dole! What dole? This is the first I have

heard of it," he declared. "Bishop Thibault is not the man for doles, I promise you."

"That is as it may be," said the beggar, "but we poor folk were promised doles in the name of a great Lord, whose name I forget, but I heard his messengers make proclamation at a cross-road, and some of them carried one device and some of them another, and see, there go part of his favours," and as he spoke he pointed to where, through the thronged street, rode a number of soldiers who carried on their coats shields divided in pales of blue and silver. The burghess whistled again.

"Those are the colours of Vaucelles," he said, and scratched his ear thoughtfully. He knew, of course, of last Sunday's business, and now the presence of this levy of beggars, coupled with the flagrant display of the arms of Vaucelles, set him to putting two and two together with a most unarithmetical fury. But the mighty beggar-man, finding him no longer interesting, and reading in his stolid face that he was never a one to oil the itching fingers of mendicity, left him to his calculations and hurried forward to the church, elbowing his way with great briskness and vigour past the more feeble among his companions in penury, as a single great carp in a pond might force his course amid a thousand minnows.

Early as it was the space before the Cathedral was, as has been said, already held by a company of men-at-arms that had been at their post, commanding the place and all the entrances thereto, when the first wave of beggary rolled into it. These men, however, bore on the little shields that were

stitched upon their jerkins, not the blue and silver pales of Vaucelles, but a device unfamiliar in Poitou, three sable ravens on a yellow field. Those that carried this cognizance seemed a set of hardy fellows, inured to arms, and they stared with a certain amused interest at the tattered throng that trudged, limped, crawled, or scampered before them, to be swallowed by the portals of the Cathedral, and seemed much diverted as they helped to herd the poor folk in the seats. There must have been at least a couple of hundred of these soldiers, and these were now reinforced by as many more that carried the arms of Vaucelles, so that any old soldier in those squadrons of misery—and, indeed, there were many such—would have noted with approval that some captain who commanded men, wearing, some of them, blue and silver pales, and, some of them, black ravens on yellow, knew how to take possession of a point of advantage in a town.

Now by this time the morning had grown a bit older and the bells of the Cathedral were clashing out their carillon and calling the godly and the ungodly alike to hasten to their devotions. The last ranks of the ragged regiment had passed into the cool gloom of the Cathedral, where, as they entered, they found men-at-arms ready for them, that marshalled them into their places and kept ever the space clear near the stall of Vaucelles.

When the neighbouring nobility came riding leisurely into Poitiers a little later on that sunny Sunday morning they were not a little surprised to find the streets near to the Cathedral alive with

groups of excited citizens, chattering eagerly among themselves, and the space before the Cathedral in the possession of a military force, one-half of which carried the familiar ensigns of Vaucelles and the other half the unknown bearings that were represented by three black ravens on a yellow field. Lords whispered to ladies, whispered to one another, glanced over their shoulders at their little formal following, and became painfully aware that if any ill were intended to them they were in very poor plight to prevent it.

But no ill was intended and no ill was manifested. The gentry of Upper Poitou, a little pale perhaps, a little perturbed perhaps, a great deal bewildered certainly, and quite at a loss how to carry themselves, found no impediment offered to their access to the church. Into the church therefore they went, as was their wont, inwardly marvelling at the display of strength and wondering what could be its meaning. But if they marvelled much while they were outside the Cathedral they marvelled yet more when they were fairly inside it and saw to their astonishment the vast spaces so compactly filled with a most unfamiliar congregation. As the puzzled nobles, observing the places where they were wont to display themselves in the possession of a rascally army of tatterdemalions, looked about them and at each other in bewilderment, not understanding what had happened, they were directed, courteously enough, by a man-at-arms that carried the Vaucelles' badge, towards the one space that had been kept vacant for their coming in the great church.

If those that were first among the noble church-goers were for protesting, even for declining, they had little leisure left them for either the one or the other. Later arrivals kept pushing in behind them, there was no way to retreat; the newcomers urged on their hesitancy, and the men-at-arms of the Vaucelles' badge skilfully drove the perplexed, helpless mob of gentlefolk into the quarter that had been reserved for their coming. All was so well arranged, all was so dexterously carried out, that before the stolid Poitevin gentry realized the full meaning of the occurrence they found themselves solemnly installed in the very area which on the previous Sunday they had kept so carefully empty, for the greater humiliation of mushrooms, upstarts, beggars, who pretend that a silk smock can ennoble a ragged shirt. Now they stared at one another like cornered sheep, and some looked over their shoulders at the doorways, as if meditating retreat. But the way seemed barred for such faint-hearts, what with the number of their own kind behind and about them, what with the rush and throng of town-folk that swarmed in at the heels of their betters and were settling down into their accustomed places, babbling behind their hands with bated breath, what with the armoured warders at the doors with the sable ravens on the yellow field.

Perhaps—for the course of all human affairs swings as tickle as the vane—things might have been different if the sheepish gentility of Poitou had found an old ram to direct them and make a butt for dignity, such an old ram as the Lord

Gontier of Grigny for example. But by a piece of luck on which Villon could not have counted the lord of Grigny was not at his devotions that Sabbath. For he had been so chafed by the sluggishness of his colleagues, their supineness under his affront, their inertness when he was all for an assault in force upon Vaucelles, he was so fretted, I say, so vexed, so gorged with choleric humours, that he drank harder, deeper and longer than was his hard, deep and long habit.

One result of these potations was an increased canker of spirit and an increased inflammation of body. Wherefore, when the half-drowned, half-strangled Seneschal of Viroflay, choking for revenge but discreet in the gratification of his desire, lay hidden behind a hedge and launched a cross-bow quarrel he did better than his shaking fingers justified. For though he struck his enemy in the shoulder, whereas he had meant to take him well in the broad of his bulk, thereby inflicting no better than a flesh wound where he had meant to deal him his death, still he did better than he guessed, albeit worse than he had intended. For the lord of Grigny being at a boiling point and full of tumid blood took a scratch badly. The suddenness of the shock had knocked him over, and, because when the lord of Grigny did fall he fell heavily as a tree falls, he lay for a while stunned by the concussion of his bulk, while the Seneschal of Viroflay, cursing his bungling fingers and not daring to make sure of results, was scampering for dear life and ever dreading to hear the thunder of his enemy in pursuit.

My Lord Gontier was found by a wood-cutter that was leading his donkey-cart for fuel, and on this same humble donkey-cart was Grigny laid in lieu of the fuel, and carried, cursing, to his castle, where he had to take to his bed and where his physicians, buzzing like blow-flies about the proud flesh, were at pains to make him stay. A clean child would have recovered sooner from the Seneschal of Viroflay's arrow than the angry tyrant, saturated with wine, who tossed and raved, weakened by a trivial hurt and twenty blood-lettings.

So the bull-faced, red-headed man was not at church that Sunday, which perhaps in a way took off a little gilt from Villon's triumph, and perhaps in a way helped to ensure its success. For Gontier, belike, would not have boggled at brawling in a church, as his fellow-nobles did, and he might not have been daunted at the odds against him, as his fellow-nobles were. Anyhow, he was not there, and it is idle to speculate on what might have chanced if he had been there, though the historian is tempted to believe that Villon would have had the best of the business one way or another, he being such a dexterous, adaptable, quick-witted fellow and nimble-fingered to pick the jewel of success from the toad-head of peril.

The honest Poitevin lordlings, having no one to guide them, and not being capable of guiding each other, and having besides their very angry and very frightened and very hysterical womenkind on their hands, did what was the best, and practically the only thing for them to do under the

whimsical conditions then prevailing. They settled down in the places allotted to them and prepared to follow the divine service in a spirit that had little of service and still less of divinity. And now, while they were settling down, very red of face and very puffed of cheeks, and while all that malodorous army of tramps was staring at the lordlings and wondering what all the pother meant, there rang out a great flourish of trumpets in the open that made all present prick their ears, and forthwith through the parted doorways came the lord of Montcorbier, very gorgeous, leading by the hand the Lady Katherine, his wife, and followed by a little mob of gentlewomen, squires and pages.

The company from Vaucelles marched up the aisle very disposedly, no consciousness on any face of any unusual happening. Even Katherine, unprepared as she was for what she had to see, showed no sign of surprise to find the larger part of the church swarming with outcasts and the space near her own stall thickly crowded with lords and dames, wearers of noble Poitevin names, that looked very uncomfortable and irate in their somewhat cooped and penned situation. The entry was well-timed to please the dramatic mind of Villon, for the party from Vaucelles had scarcely taken their seats when the bishop himself entered, attended by his clergy and staring with angry eyes less at the occupants of the Vaucelles stall than at the astonishing congregation of rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars that filled the larger part of the church.

CHAPTER IX.

ONE OF THE THIRD ORDER.

THE service began and was followed decorously. Katherine and François were exemplary in their self-absorbed piety. The Poitevin gentry sought to drown a sense of discomfiture in a show of devotion; the good folk of the town, their first amazement over, were honestly pious and quiet, after their kind; and as for the ragamuffins, they were too much occupied in thinking of the promised dole and too much overawed by the presence of so many men-at-arms, to dream of doing anything else than sitting tight in their places and waiting on events.

It was a very choleric, plethoric bishop that scrambled up the steps of the pulpit a little later and began to stutter forth such apology for a sermon as his rage permitted. To do the bishop justice, if he was in no sense an admirable man, and still less an admirable bishop, he had at least the courage of his opinions. He had come from long bodily custom, and equally long disuse of any thinking faculty, to regard the sacred building as

his especial property and the words he spoke within, and indeed without, its walls as having a sanctity co-equal with the sayings of Holy Writ. Wherefore he was at the first almost too paralyzed with anger at the sight of ragged rascals squatting under his nose on the benches habitually favoured by a familiar gentility, to express his indignation with anything approaching to articulateness or coherence. He gasped out angry protests against pollution, against degradation; he said something about turning the Cathedral into a den of thieves; he thundered denunciations against those that had brought about this outrage, and as he spoke he glared at François, who was listening attentively with a fine air of edification. It never occurred to the indignant bishop that he could possibly be in the wrong or his church other than profaned by the presence of the poor pilgrims of misery who had so strangely invaded it. So he stormed along, till he was blown and compelled to make an end for lack of ideas, words to clothe them in, and breath to utter them withal.

Thereafter the ceremony moved on its beautiful course in peace, and when it came to its glorious close Villon and his lady passed out of the church as gravely and sedately as they had entered it. But outside the church Villon led Katherine to where her horse awaited her and helped her to mount, and stood by her stirrup waiting while that strange wave of squalid humanity poured out of the church and was being massed in ranks in the open space by the Vaucelles' men-at-arms to wait the promised dole. The gentry of Poitou, wonder-

ing what was to happen, now lingered expectant about the Cathedral door, and the no less interested townsfolk did the like. It was a curious spectacle ; the great place thronged by a mob of the most abject of mankind, with a burly giant well to the front, like a general of all the beggars, the soldiers in their parti-coloured habits encircling all and keeping order, the richly-clad lords and ladies, the homely burgesses, and from every house overlooking the scene, windows open and folk hanging out, eager to see, eager to hear, and above all the noble proportions of the Cathedral, rising in beauty through the summer noon.

There were some moments of strained silence, and then Katherine, to whom all that had happened was as strange as it was to any other spectator of that day's business, saw that her husband had left her side. He had taken from a squire that stood by him a garment which he put on over his fine clothes and which proved to be the brown robe of a Franciscan. Now this was less amazing than it appeared, for while Villon was still a lad he had been persuaded by his uncle the canon, who had ever diligently laboured for his salvation, to become a member of the third order of St. Francis. This Villon did, and when the reason for compliance had ceased, as it soon did, forgot all about the matter and continued cheerfully in his evil ways. But now he remembered the act with a kind of tender compunction and resolved for once at least to wear the habit. Knotting the cords of his girdle about him he advanced bareheaded, accompanied by four stout soldiers carrying bags. When he

came in front of the Cathedral Villon paused, and in the immediate silence began to speak.

“Brethren,” the Franciscan of the third order began—and though his voice was not a great one, it seemed to pass as easily as a swooping bird, to the furthest limits of the crowd, and, to complete the simile, to poise on each man’s shoulder and to sing into each man’s ear—“brethren, many pictures have been painted, and many stories have been told, of the kingdom of God. On the walls of this church, from the mouth of that ecclesiastic, you have been shown, you have been assured, that the kingdom of Heaven is as a kind of garden where popes and kings, princes and captains, queens and abbesses, lords and ladies, enter as if by privilege of their station into the fellowship of the elect, passing through the gates of chrysoprase and chalcedony, treading the causeways of gold and of silver, ushered into benignity to the sound of shawms and the tinkling of cymbals and the music of harps. This is a vision delectable for the great ones of the earth; they do but, in their imaginings, shift from pomp to pomp, and translate an ephemeral into an eternal splendour. But I tell you that the kingdom of God is no such pagan paradise, no pleasure-house for the smooth of limb, the comely of visage, the sweet-smelling, the richly vested, the softly spoken, carrying delicately the burden of their lusts and prides and desires, their evil communications, the zest of their fornications. The earth is a pleasant place for them; let them be content with the earth, for their fancies are all vanity, and they

are deaf to the voices of all the angels of God and pay heed only to the flattery of the serpent. But I tell you the kingdom of God is like unto a Lazar-house, set upon the shores of a sea, and in that Lazar-house there be rooms upon rooms, and in every room there are many beds, clean and warm and smelling of wholesome herbs. And over the sea fare many vessels that ply to and fro without pause throughout the ages, and those that come are heavy with their burden of the wretched, that are indeed the children of God, the halt and the blind and the misshapen, and those that are racked with agonies, and lepers and the plague-stricken, and those that are stained by sores and eaten by ulcers, and those that rot and go green while they still live, and those that are born monsters, and are sold to showmen, and those that are made monsters in their childhood for the same trade of sin, and those that are so born through the love of woman that they must needs curse the love of woman, and those that have the falling sickness, and those that are crazy and skip and grin and know not wherefore, and those that are possessed of devils, and those that go hungry all their days, and those that are slaves, and those that live in filth, and those that are pitied by no man. These are the creatures that are carried over the sea to the Lazar-house of God. And in that house there are white beds waiting for these rags of manhood, these stumps, these abortions, where they lie and taste of the bliss of peace, and angels go up and down in those rooms, and there is healing in their smile, and healing in their touch, and healing in their

speech, which is the speech that is spoken in the courts of Heaven, and there is healing in the wonder of their coming and going, and healing in the rustle of their wings. And one by one these miserables are made whole, even as they should seem if the world were what the world is not yet, and angels take them by the hand and lead them out of the Lazar-house, into gardens and lawns that lie behind, and there for a great while they abide in felicity till their spirits are fitted for the Presence."

He paused for a moment, and in that pause a murmur passed over the mob of his listeners, a murmur of thanks, a murmur of amazement, almost a murmur of joy, for never before had such words fallen on such ears. And the giant in the front rank, he that carried the scar on his forehead, nodded his head and grinned. And the faces of the lords were curtained with frowns, and their hearts were as stones for their hatred of the preacher and their hatred of the folk to whom he preached. But the preacher paid them no heed, and in a moment he lifted up his voice again, and again the multitude was hushed, and the speaker's words pierced the stillness of the noon.

"Comrades," he called this time, and his voice had a kind of challenge in it, like the call of a trumpet in war; "comrades, remember that there is a kingdom of earth as well as a kingdom of Heaven, and of that kingdom those are heirs that have not yet come into their inheritance. Earth can never be made like unto Heaven, but earth can be made less like unto Hell. I think there

shall come a time when the men that toil, and the men that suffer, and the men that weep, those that are oppressed, and those that are rejected, and those that are dismayed, shall share honestly and happily in the world's pleasures, as they now share, dishonestly and unhappily, in the world's pains. Not always will the power and the glory lie in the hands of a few, not always shall the many toil and hunger and mourn that the few may take their ease and feast and be merry. There was an Age of Gold, sung by the poets, when men lived in simplicity, in equality, in contentment, where none lacked meal that the measures of others might overflow, where none was shadowed by famine, where none sickened over the ceaseless task, where none was abased before a mortal as if the mortal were a god. That Golden Age must return even as the dawn returns after dusk, for the world is old and yet young, and it takes the sum of many ages to make a day in its history. The Age of Gold may not come in our time. We are as withered leaves falling from the Tree of Life that shall lie about its roots through autumns and through winters, for generations yet to be. But we, as we moulder, keep those roots warm and fatten the earth about them, and in the bliss of the spring the tree bears new leaves that are quick and brisk in the joy of the morning. Some day, men like us shall burgeon from the Tree of Life to find that the world's spring is renewed, that the earth is a sweet and wholesome dwelling-place for all its children. I cannot say, I cannot even guess how that change will come about, nor when. It may come in peace,

and it may seem to come in war, for the down-trodden may weary of the master's heel, and remembering that they can die but once, may break their chains and turn on their oppressors and rend them, and be the masters in their turn for a season. But in the Age of Gold, which is the age of wisdom, which is the age of humanity, which is the age of Christ recognized, there will be neither masters nor slaves, but men."

The speaker made an end and stood for a moment motionless, gazing at the array of wretched faces that were gazing back at him, famine glaring from their eyes, oppression wrinkling their cheeks, misery tightening their white lips. One great scarred face glared greedy approval. An inarticulate roar came from them, a roar that was part applause for words of cheer and promise, and part empty menace of the enemies that had so much strength and so little pity, and part the wordless clamour of despair. The faces brightened, however, as the men that carried the bags moved from where they had stood waiting behind Villon the Franciscan, and advanced towards the crowd, opening the mouths of the bags as they went.

There was a silver piece for every man, for every woman, for every child in the throng. The distribution was made quietly, orderly. Any lurking desire on the part of individuals, sturdier beggars than others—and one scarred beggar was very sturdy and very grasping—to fling themselves upon the almoners and grab more than their share being curbed, firstly, by the stalwart carriage of those same almoners, and secondly, by the presence

of those waiting ranks of men-at-arms, who would have thought nothing of cutting the whole ragged regiment to pieces at a hint from their leader. While the distribution continued Villon stripped off his Franciscan garment, bonneted his head and, returning to Katherine's side, mounted his horse, and waited, watching with a smile that was half mirthful and half sad how each eager dirty bunch of fingers in its turn clawed at and closed over its portion of silver. It was Villon's own money of which he thus made ducks and drakes ; part, and not a small part of his gains in the Burgundian war. The most of those that looked on took it, of course, to be levied from the treasury of Vaucelles, and many paraphrased a proverb, muttering that a fool and his wife's money were soon parted.

Villon heard none of these whisperings and would have heeded them not a jot if he had. He had done his day's business, he had played his day's game ; he had found a strange satisfaction in making a few hundred poor rogues taste a passing happiness. Also he had been very humanly content in exasperating his adversaries, and had heartily enjoyed the lowering brows and scowls and frowns of the little nobility of Poitou.

The distribution was over. The last piece of silver was pressed into the last dirty palm extended to receive it, and till that last piece of silver changed owners not a man, not a woman, burgess or noble, stirred from the spot. It was as good as a play to them however much they may have disapproved of the matter, and it made a mark, even if

no pleasant one, on the monotonous round of Poitevin existence. Then the trumpets blew again, a lively sally, and the tattered gang shouted for joy, and amid all the noise and clamour Villon and Katherine rode quietly from the Cathedral, and their attendants after them, and behind these the men-at-arms marched in right formation, a little army of stout fellows that carried the blue and silver bars of Vaucelles and the black ravens on yellow of Montcorbier. And that day was long remembered in Poitiers as the "Day of the Mad Dole."

CHAPTER X.

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS.

KATHERINE was considerably elated by her lover's address and dexterity, and showed her satisfaction in smiles and sweet words as they went their way homewards. But there was a thorn in the rose, gall in the honey, a fly in the ointment. A sabbath that was crammed with raptures had, towards the close, its bitterness and its sting. For a while they gallanted and wooed as they rode; Katherine was very proud of her man, and made her pleasure plain in gracious amenities of glance and speech. Villon basked in her sunshine, and, as was his way in such moments, took his merits very readily for granted. Then came the bolt.

"Why," asked Katherine, after a little silence which Villon was too pleased with the world and himself to interrupt, "why did you talk such nonsense to the beggar-folk?"

Villon looked at her in some wonder.

"Did I talk nonsense?" he asked. "Honestly, I thought that some at least of what I said was rather well-worded."

In fact he thought a good deal more of it than

his speech expressed, but he put it in that way for humility's sake.

Katherine shrugged her shoulders a little and looked at him fretfully.

"I make no doubt," she said, a little sourly, "that the words were well enough. You are a poet, of course, and understand such things. It was of the matter, not the manner, that I was thinking."

"Pray, what was wrong with the matter?" Villon asked, a little nettled, for when things went well with him he hated any question or innuendo that threatened to lessen his self-content.

"Well, was it quite generous, quite kindly," Katherine continued, "to make such sport of the poor wretches?"

"Sport of them," Villon repeated, not believing his ears. "How did I make sport of them, in Heaven's name?"

"Why," answered Katherine simply, "in pretending that you thought, and that God thought, that they were the equals of people of gentle blood, and that they would be as welcome in Heaven as princes secular and princes ecclesiastic, and great lords and ladies."

"It is not for me to say what God thinks," François answered quietly, "for you will find His words and His wishes set down very clearly in a certain little book, but in saying what I said to those poor folk I spoke the thoughts of my heart."

Katherine glanced at him sharply, under knitted brows. Was he still keeping up the jest? He certainly looked serious enough. That was the worst of being married to a poet. Poets had, or thought

they had, such extraordinary ideas and seemed to take such pleasure in airing fantastical notions as others might take in wearing fantastical clothes.

"Surely," she said, somewhat sharply, "surely you would not have me believe that you honestly consider those wretched creatures the equals before Heaven of the great lords and princes into whose hands it has pleased God to put the governance of the world?"

She looked at him very sternly as she spoke, and Villon felt painfully conscious that the fire of last week's strife was likely to be relighted. But he was very much in earnest as to what he had done and what he had said that day, and the light in Katherine's eyes could not frighten him from his belief.

"Madam, my sweet wife," he answered gravely, "I am no more than a poor player on the world's stage, and can do no more than speak with such little skill as is given to me the words that I find set down in the book of my heart. I have lived too much of my life in the fellowship of the wretched not to feel for them an abounding pity, and if I, that am what I am, can feel such pity, can we doubt the love of the Maker and Master of all folk, from prince to pickpurse? These poor devils have five fingers to a hand, five toes to a foot; they are made in God's image as we are. They are our brothers, they are our sisters. The love of God is as warm for them as for us."

"A great noble," Katherine retorted somewhat inconsequentially, "may deal kindly with his servants and on occasion feel sorry for their sorrows,

and yet not hold them his equals. There must be lord and vassal, noble and commoner, or there would be no service done, and how can he that renders service be the equal of him that is served ? ”

“ Fair Kate,” answered François, “ when you behold a cry of players interpreting a miracle or a mystery, there is one that will play the king with a gilt crown, and one that will play the knave and get many bangings and thwackings, and one an angel, and one a devil out of Hell, and one shall be a varlet, and one a fool, and one a soldier with a sword a mile long. Yet, when the play is ended, and they have pulled off their masks and their trappings, they are just a company of human beings with equal rights to breathe and eat and sleep.”

“ That is no argument,” said Katherine tartly ; and indeed Villon was aware of its weakness, and yet the simile liked him, as all thoughts did that pictured the world as it pleased him to conceive it, the theatre of an amazing play. So he only laughed, and would have changed the subject but Katherine was not to be so put off.

“ You will not think these wild thoughts after a while,” she said emphatically. “ You are a noble yourself now, with a right to rule over men, and will cease to think every hedger your equal.”

Villon smiled a little sadly. He knew well enough that change of condition often meant change of opinion, yet he thought his own convictions were tough enough to stand the stress of fair weather. But he had no wish to brawl with his helpmate, and little hope of convincing her, so he surrendered his position with a jesting speech.

“Like enough, kind Kate,” he cried; “I am too new in gentility to savour its greatness rightly. By and by, as you say, by and by.”

Now because Villon seemed to yield, and because he had done so well that day, and because she had no wish at all to quarrel with him for thinking too tenderly of a parcel of churls, Katherine paid him back smile for smile, and flung dictation of one side. So the rest of the ride was pleasant, and the rest of the day and the best of the night. But as a man that feels the sting of a green wound in his body, so François felt the sting of a grey thought that the summer seas of love could ruffle with squalls not uneasily, and at times be vexed by hurricane and tempest wherein there was danger of the good ship Wedlock going down with all hands, as it were, or drifting derelict for the rest of its battered existence.

It was about this time that Villon composed his “Ballade of the Newly Rich,” in which he expressed with a fierce irony and a gentle tenderness the feelings of a fire-new lordling towards the plebeian friends of his poverty. Katherine liked the ballade very much at first, taking it in earnest and thinking that it set forth Villon’s improved opinion, but when she guessed, from a merry shining in his eyes and some wry puckering about the lips, that it was writ in mockery, she was very angry indeed. There are people who cannot abide any form of satire, and Katherine was one of them. Perhaps it was the very ferocity of her own native truthfulness which made her incapable of understanding how anyone could say anything in prose

or in verse that was capable of any other interpretation than its patent meaning.

Villon made his peace deftly enough with his "Ballade of Lovely Ladies," in which he rhymed a catalogue of divinities that had been the loves of poets and heroes in the past, and imagined them all gathered together in the lilled greenness of the Elysian Fields to agree that the fair Katherine, then living in France, was the most beautiful she that had ever been loved by mortal man and praised by mortal poet. Fair Katherine took the flattery cheerfully enough; she was not yet so much a wife that she was weary of being wooed and praised and be-rhymed as if she were still unwon, and conscious as she was of her comeliness she liked well enough to have it blazoned cunningly.

Here is this very "Ballade of Lovely Ladies" as it lives for us, preserved in the pages of Dom Gregory's "Chronicles of Poitou" that lie in the Abbey of Bonne Aventure.

" A meadow lies by Stygian strands,
And o'er its lilled greenness go
The dames of many days and lands,
That men found lovely long ago ;
There Balkis in her pomp doth show
Who stooped the wisest to her sway,
And Lilith wanders to and fro :
But Kate is far more fair than they.

" There Jephthah's daughter wrings her hands,
Still weeping for the ancient woe ;
And there Aholibah commands
The captains of the sword and bow
Their hearts into her heart to throw ;
And Abishag, the maid of May,
Keeps David's ancient blood aglow :
But Kate is far more fair than they.

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS. 107

" There Ariadne strides the sands,
And whistles for a wind to blow
Her lover home : there Daphne stands
Transformed to laurel, in a row
With Syrinx, changed to reed, you know ;
And Philomela wails her way,
While tears from Arethusa flow :
But Kate is far more fair than they."

ENVOY.

" Prince, in your painted books I trow
That many lovely ladies stay,
Composed of rose and gold and snow :
But Kate is far more fair than they."

Katherine found the verses very flattering and their maker very affable. She was full of curiosity as to the ladies named, that were for the most part names to her and nothing more. She would have François tell her the exact shade of the hair of Balkis, and the true colour of Ariadne's eyes, and what Aholibah wore and what Arethusa, and on all these points Villon, cheerfully defiant of contradiction, was ready with copious information which greatly increased Katherine's already high opinion of her husband's learning.

But neither ballades nor erudition could serve, after a little while, to console Katherine for the loneliness of Vaucelles. When the King's order had sent her and her lover into what promised to be an exquisite exile in Poitou, Katherine had welcomed, as merrily as François, the prospect of the country life. And, as we know, for the first few days she, as well as her husband, found that country life a very paradise. But for all her love—and she was very much in love with Villon—

Katherine had not counted on having nothing but his society to enliven the country house. She had counted on finding herself, in fact, as she was by right, the great lady of the province, the queen of a small court that might be little less than royal in its splendours and its joys.

Under such conditions exile from Paris seemed but a trivial thing, for in Paris, after all, she was but one in a number of her peers. Not only to the Queen, but to the wives of the great dukes, she had to give place and reverence. But in Poitou the supremacy of her house was unquestioned, and in Poitou she looked to shine with unrivalled lustre. She was amazed and astonished, therefore, when she found that her dreamed-of pleasures and festivals were to remain dreams; that she was to be shunned as if she had been stricken with leprosy or the plague; that her marriage had withered all the fruits of her dignity, and that neither her wealth nor her lineage were of avail to bring one single noble visitor across her threshold, or to win her welcome in a single castle.

At first she took her isolation valiantly. Villon's treatment of the lord of Grigny, Villon's triumph over the Poitevins in Poitiers Cathedral, had turned the laugh against her enemies and cheered her spirits. But as time went on and the ban of her neighbours remained in force her high spirits began to dwindle. They went no more to Poitiers for Mass. They had asserted themselves for once and thereafter dignity insisted that they should hold aloof. So they paid their devotions in the chapel of the castle of Vaucelles-les-Tours, whose

chaplain was an old and learned priest, very wise and very shy, who spent all his time that was not claimed by his religious duties in strange studies in which powders and liquids and vapours, mortars and crucibles and retorts, played important parts, whose result occasionally blew the good priest from his rooms with violent explosions and filled the adjacent corridors with murk and stench.

But there were other matters harder to find substitutes for than matters ecclesiastical. Poitiers prided itself on being a jolly town, where some sort of sport was ever forward, a mystery play or a banquet, or some merry festivity of a Guild, or some great church ceremonial, or some dance, or masque, or pleasant tournament. And in all these jollities the Lady Katherine, who liked amusement as well as another, had no part. It was truly a grave change from King Louis' court, where, though the King's tastes were neither frivolous nor luxurious, there was diversion of some kind, week in and week out—besides which, to live in Paris was, in itself, diversion—it was truly a grave change, she found, from all this to the solitude of a Poitou fastness, honeycombed with gaunt passages where ragged arras flapped with every breath, and vast rooms, where the few footsteps echoed, and the shadows seemed lurking ghosts. In this solitude there was no one to speak with—for Katherine did not count her women as society—save the dazed old speculative chaplain, and her husband. The chaplain had lived so long in the loneliness of Vaucelles that he had grown used to it, and resented, as far as his gentle temper

could resent anything, the presence of the new lord and lady.

As for Villon he seemed content enough with the situation, and this content of his only served to whet a keener edge to Katherine's exasperation. Villon actually seemed to think that life was delightful in that old grey castle, with its old green gardens, without friends, without company, for all the world like Adam and Eve, with only the beasts for fellow-citizens. He did not seem to care a snap for the fact that they were shunned by the countryside, and would, it appeared, have been well pleased to pass his days in wandering with Katherine through wood or lane or valley, his evenings in the writing of verses or the readings of chronicles, and his nights in her arms. Katherine began to cherish a dislike to rhymes even when addressed to her—which, at first, she had not thought possible—to detest the country, to shiver at the sight of book or manuscript, and to be rendered fretful by the tenders of honourable and lawful love. In a phrase Katherine was not made for the country life, at least when that country life was attended by a social ostracism which scourged her pride as much as it denied her entertainment.

Under these unfortunate conditions it was inevitable, where a man and a woman were concerned, and not two angels, that a rift should appear in the domestic felicity, that little jars should lead to little tiffs, that tiffs should pave the way for re-criminations, that what began as a mere gusty difference of opinion should swell with astonishing

swiftness into a heady brawl, and from thence to a stormy quarrel. Villon, with his temple of sentimentalities rattling in ruins about his ears, was at first amazed, then pathetic, then angry. Finally, being on the whole a good-tempered fellow, he strove to summon philosophy to his aid, and to find compensation for the change in his fortunes where Katherine, unhappily, could find none, in the enjoyment of nature.

To Master François, as to many another that has spent his youth to the prime in the mesh of a great city, there came a belated love of nature that filled his days with wonder and enriched him with great joy. As a little rascal lad he had indeed played in the fields about Paris and picked flowers therein and chased butterflies in summer. But if these pastimes lifted him a little from the gutters, because of the something within him that he did not understand then nor for long after, they were not frequent enough, they did not enough endure, to sweeten with any sincere rusticity the life of the child of the streets. They were but the unappreciated oases in the sterile desert of a stunted city growth, leaving no more enduring impression upon the mind than the green stains of plucked grasses left upon the childish palm.

Now, for the first time, he found himself set in the space and calm and colour of the country, and found his civic spirit deliciously drawn to its mystery. He delighted as a child might delight in the meadows, with their treasury of unfamiliar flowers whose homely names he learned eagerly from rustics, not unbewildered to find their new lord

from Paris so curious about common things. His Muse of slums and wine-shops began to twist daisies in her hair, to skip like a gipsy for pleasure at the sound of the wind among the trees, to rejoice in the shift of the seasons, the warmth of earth where the spade had struck it, the call of birds in the thicket, the shelter of the rat beneath the hedge.

Villon made little use of his slowly accumulated and truly pagan knowledge; he gained it to satiate his ceaseless curiosity as to all forms and manifestations of life. The fantastic adaptability which had once enabled him to play a brave part upon a great stage now encouraged him, even compelled him, to find his measure of satisfaction in the simplicity of the countryside and to forget in its benignity the squalor of a lifetime and the glory of a week. The fall of rain that sounded so horrid on the eaves of a garret seemed now to cleanse his spirit with its stream, even as it cleansed the dusty leaves. Sunrise and sunset thrilled him with ecstasies that were denied, if they desired, interpretation.

It was all good this new life: good to walk on white highways guarded by honourable poplars; good to loll on a bridge by a mill-stream and watch the churning waters while one chewed a contemplative straw; good to lose oneself in elusive woods; good to gossip with labourers and hear fairy tales by humble hearths. Master François had come into a glorious dominion in whose use he clean forgot the troubles that should vex the temper and fret the sensibility of the lord of Mont-

corbier. But in that dominion, unhappily, Katherine could find neither rest nor shelter.

Another than Villon, in that rough and ready age, might have judged it wise to temper the fretfulness of his mate with a marital severity which public opinion would have justified. But François was no house-tyrant; like all dreamers, even those that can, as he could, dream themselves into action, he was easily dashed. From being, as he believed, the gladdest rascal alive, poised on the peak of joy, he found himself, quite inexplicably to him, the companion of an irritable, hysterical creature that at her best was languidly unhappy and at her worst was something very like a shrew.

All the reason that he could find for this metamorphosis, more terrible than any recorded by Ovid, was that some Poitevin boobies and ruffians, prime chuckleheads, and dunderheads of the densest, chose to deny all knowledge of them and to leave them ruthlessly alone. Villon despised the bumpkins; he had paid off his score against them with interest and would have thought no more about it. But Katherine evidently set an astonishing value on the affability of the Poitevin gentlefolk and fretted herself sick and thin to miss it. She might have fretted less if there had been promise of a third life to link the drifting hearts, but there was, unhappily, no such promise, and the rift widened daily. It was under these circumstances that Villon bethought him one morning of his eccentric neighbour, the lord of Little House.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LORD OF LITTLE HOUSE.

A WEST wind was blowing delicately against Villon's face as he skirted the wooded hill that hid, from the boundaries of his own dominion, the dwelling of the lord of Little House. When a west wind comes souging its way through the lonely woodlands, or, for the matter of that, through the thickest streets of a sinful city, any fellow that has one pennyworth of poet's blood in his body to quicken his vital liquor begins to hear soft voices in his ears and to feel soft fingers pinching at his heart-strings.

So it was with Villon. Wave after wave of forgotten memories seemed to surge about him as he trod over upland and meadow with the morning's breath upon his forehead. Now it was the spires of Paris, black against a yellow sky, that he saw again as he had seen them on the evening when he had the unhappy brawl with Philippe Sermaise which ended in the hurting of Sermaise to the death. Villon shuddered in the warm air. He could still feel the pain of his cut lip; he could still hear the squeal of Sermaise, as, mad with

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pain and rage, Villon jabbed his short sword into him ; he could still sicken at the recollection of the weary time of flight, of hiding, before the pardon of the dying man was made valid by royal favour.

Another puffing caress of the west wind carried Villon's thoughts elsewhere and over a good gap of years. This time it was to the boozing ken of the Fircone Tavern, where the youth of the Sermaise scuffle had ripened into a rhymster, matured into a rascal, and mellowed into a tragic sot. There were many men in the room, all of them Master François' ready subjects in rascality ; there were many women in the room, every one of whom he had known too well. One woman he saw very clearly, as if she had appeared before him on the leaf-strewn glade. She had been, she still was, handsome, with frowsy fair hair and cheeks that were over-red with much wine ; she was dressed like a man, in a sweat-stained, wine-stained suit of green which showed much of her comely body ; she had loved him well and proved it to the utterance.

Villon drew his hand over his forehead as if by that action to banish the phantoms that beset him. "What a lot a man may do in a little life," he muttered to himself as he reminded himself, ironically, that the kennel-cur of those days now tramped over broad lands that acknowledged his sway, and had won his heart's desire. His heart's desire ! Villon gave a sigh as he thought of her, and in one queer, mean little moment of self-pity he compassionated himself as a very much

injured person. Then he broke into a bitter laugh. If he had been such a fool as to think that life could be all roses and honey it was well he should be cured of his folly. What had he ever done that he should be so fed, so garlanded? Yet his heart ached too, boyishly, because to him, a reluctant Pygmalion, his idol had proved human, after all.

He walked more briskly to dissipate the megrims. He walked alone, save for his thoughts, and though he carried sword and dagger his body was guarded by no armour. Though Poitou was hostile he feared no danger within his own domains, for in the first place they were too vigilantly wardered by his soldiery, and in the second place he guessed that the lord of Grigny was still a sick man, thanks to his bad blood and the barb of an ambush-arrow, and in the third place because he did not greatly care into what ambuscade he might straggle, now that fortune seemed to have taken away the best. So on he fared and tried to whistle heedlessly. Now he was in the field where the milking-maid had mocked him; now he was rounding the heel of the hill; now he was looking at Petitmanoir, lying straight ahead of him.

He saw instantly that both the lord and the lady of Little House were at home, for both were in the garden that now bloomed in what had been the courtyard of the four towers. The girl was bending over some business with her flowers, and the old gentleman was walking slowly up and down in a kind of alley of fruit bushes, reading to himself from a little book. As Villon drew nearer

he could see that the lord of Little House was savouring the sense of what he read to the full, for his lips moved and puckered and twitched in such fashion as showed that he was pleasantly mouthing to himself the words upon the page.

The girl saw Villon from the first, of that he felt sure, for she faced him as she moved down a kind of hedge of stalwart, gaudy country flowers. But she made no sign to show that she had any knowledge of his presence, and it was the lord of Little House who, lifting his head away from his book as if in meditation over some exquisite passage, caught sight of his coming neighbour, and paused for a moment in his promenade in an attitude of pleased surprise. Then he thrust the little volume he was reading into his pouch and advanced with both hands extended to greet the lord of Montcorbier.

"You are very welcome to Little House, honoured lord," he proclaimed in amiable piping tones that suggested somehow the greetings of a hospitable bird, "very welcome indeed. I hoped you had not forgotten us, for, indeed, we have not been allowed to forget you. Gossip, sir, blows about a province like featherdown, and so, stay-at-homes though we be, we know what we know. Do we not, Loysette?"

The girl had made no motion to advance since Villon had entered the garden. She had plucked a small crimson apple from a dwarf-tree hard by and was munching it slowly, biting into it with sharp white teeth, while her eyes were fixed steadily on the new-comer's face. Villon was scarcely

strange to the stares of women, nor was it his way to be at all abashed in their presence, but there was something in the gaze of Loysette of Little House that made him feel nearer to abashment than he had been since childhood. The girl had such curious eyes, scrutinizing, dominating, coldly mocking eyes that seemed strangely familiar to him. He had only seen her once before, but he had felt the familiar feeling then. Now, of course, he knew whose eyes the eyes of the girl recalled, the eyes of Louis the king. Villon had very little doubt of the report that Katherine had told him.

As the girl answered nothing to the old man's question he turned and beckoned her forward, and she advanced towards François with a puzzling smile upon her face.

"Do you like apples?" she asked, extending to him the fruit from which she had bitten a mouthful. "Will you share my luncheon, or are you afraid of my grandmother's example?"

The old gentleman twitched his ear, and looked a little bewildered. Villon picked the apple from her fingers and bit a piece next to where the girl had bitten.

"This might well be paradise," he protested; "and if your ancestress were as fair as her granddaughter a true man would risk the stomach-ache. But I see here no sign of the serpent?"

"Do you not?" said the girl. "I do." And she giggled maliciously. Villon pretended to look about him, and his gaze encountered the pink affability of the old gentleman's features. The girl followed his glance and shook her head.

"I mean no disrespect to my elders," she said demurely, and she went up and took the old man not untenderly by the hand and looked not untenderly into his bland visage. "You are no ancient snake, sire of Little House," she said, half questioning, half asserting. Then she turned again to the visitor.

"I think," she said with a pretty gravity, "that whenever a maid meets with a man a quick eye can catch some glitter of the coils of the snake in the grass."

Then in a twink her gravity vanished, and she laughed at her own conceit so merrily and so long that Villon stared at her in wonder and knew not what to make of her. The old gentleman nodded urbanely and seemed to take his daughter's whimsies as a matter of course, and to be well content with them and with her and with himself and with the world in general so far as the world in general was represented by the holding of Petitmanoir.

The old gentleman was the first to speak after the maid had done with laughing.

"We have heard of you," he said; "you have made some talk. Though I go but little abroad news comes to me with the winged heels of Hermes. You bring, it seems, a humour that is quite Parisian into our stolid province. You string a noble on his own gallows; you preach equality and fraternity to a levy of beggars. Plainly, you have a gay nature."

The old gentleman seemed to be laughing softly all the while he spoke, and his voice was charged with a purring complacency. Villon could not

feel quite sure whether the lord of Little House was laughing with him or laughing at him, and felt slightly irritated by the uncertainty. Like most humorists, satirists, and lampooners, Villon was sensible to derision. The girl looked at him steadily all the while and smiled, and here again Villon could not decide whether her smile was sympathetic or contemptuous. Certainly they were very perplexing neighbours. But he was not willing to be put out of countenance by a suave ancient and a saucy maid, so he brisked up his wits for an answer.

"You were good enough," he said, "to give me a hint of what I might expect, though I did not quite take your meaning at the time. It is patent that the Poitevins are for the most part disinclined to welcome strangers. But you were affable enough to proffer hospitality, and I trust I do not strain your courtesy by my visit."

The lord of Little House shook his white head vigorously, till his silver locks swayed from his pink face like the rays of a painted sun.

"Not a whit," he protested. "I told you the truth when I told you that I had no prejudices. I care not whether a man's coat-armour date from the Deluge or date from yesterday. It is the man I ask for behind the blazonry. My neighbours may do as they please; that is their right; but I also, I do as I please, and it is my pleasure to welcome you."

Here he saluted Villon again with such an amiable air of patronage as tickled Villon's fancy.

"It is not for me," the elder went on politely,

"to concern myself with some episodes in your life which were, shall we say, more high-spirited than judicious, or, at least, than judicial." Here he paused to laugh very heartily at his little play with words. "What concerns me," he resumed, "is that, as I gather, you straddle Pegasus, you scale Parnassus, you have drunk Hippocrene and kissed the Muse. In a word, you are a poet."

Villon made as if to utter a modest protest, but the old lord would not suffer him to proceed.

"You are a poet, sir, there is no denying it. I am not, it is true, rich in the knowledge of many of your rhymes, but what of that? All the water is alike in a well, though we drink but one cupful, and I have tasted, sir, of those verses with which you regaled our dear lord and king at a time when, as I understand, you were not aware of his kingship. I promise you, my friend, they made my pulses beat."

While Villon stood somewhat at a loss how to reply to this compliment the girl thrust her head a little ways forward and showed her white teeth at him.

"Master Poet," she shrilled. "Master Poet, have you brought me my verses?"

Now Villon had forgotten all about the verses, and for the moment felt that he looked guilty. But in a trice he was ready to brazen his sin of omission into a virtue.

"You set me a task beyond my poor powers," he protested with a smile, "but you shall have your verses, I swear it, by my patron saint."

"I thought Saint Nicholas was somewhat the

friend of breakers of oaths, and of locks," the girl said slyly. Villon laughed aloud, for he had almost forgotten that he had ever cracked a crib or picked a pocket. But the lord of Little House, who had taken the girl's suggestion, frowned slightly.

"You are too free with the gentleman, Loysette," he chided. "We may very well let bygones be bygones in the case of one who is both poet and soldier."

François protested warmly that he did not in the least resent any allusions to his past, and that, as for the verses, she should have them that very day if she wished, for he would improvise a running rhyme for her there and then. The girl seemed pleased at the proposal, but the lord of Little House intervened.

"Fair and softly," he declared; "our guest has not yet tasted our cheer, and if he has a mind to improvise he will be all the better for a mouthful of wine."

With that he bade Loysette enter the dwelling and bring forth liquor and cups. The girl departed, looking over her shoulder provokingly at Villon as she did so. When she was out of sight the old gentleman laid his hand in very friendly fashion upon Villon's arm and drew him gently into an easy walk down a little avenue of rustic flowers.

"My friend," said the old gentleman, "as I have heard of you, so, I take it, you have heard of me, for, as I say, gossip skims like a swallow in Poitou and carries all tales to all places."

He paused and looked steadily at his guest,

and Villon, believing frankness to be his best part, admitted that he had heard some rumours about his host and his past history.

"You have heard, I suppose," the lord of Little House resumed, "that this girl, Loysette, is not my child, but the child of one whom we must all serve and reverence."

Villon said, somewhat drily, that he had indeed heard it hinted that the girl was the daughter of King Louis. His companion nodded.

"That is what people say," he went on, "and for once in a way what people say happens to be true. Loysette is called Loysette because she is the daughter of King Louis. I have no desire to conceal the fact. As I told you before, and as your welcome here proves, I have no prejudices. I am a philosopher of that ancient school of Cyrene in Greater Greece which found its law of life in the attainment and enjoyment of pleasure."

François, hazily recalling some knowledge of old-time philosophies from his university days, murmured that the theory when it could be put into practice had its advantages.

"Possibly," suggested the lord of Little House, "you might like to hear my story from my own lips and form your opinion on it."

Villon insisted that nothing would afford him greater satisfaction, and as by this time they had come in their ramble to a kind of little arbour in the angle of a ruined wall, where there were wooden benches and a wooden table, the pair came to a halt. With a courteous gesture the elder invited his guest to be seated, and then took his place oppo-

site to him. He sat silently for a few moments, pressing the tips of his fine white fingers against his pink forehead as if by that action he were evoking the images of the past, and Villon kept silence and waited upon his will. Presently the old gentleman leaned comfortably back against the wall of the arbour and began.

"I was a racketsy lad when the world was more than half a century younger, and I was a racketsy man when his late Majesty—whom the saints have in their keeping—was something of my way of thinking. I had stuck to the King's cause throughout the English wars and I fasted in his company at Chinon because I hoped to feast in his company in Paris. In which, as I think, I showed my wisdom."

His words had set his listener off on a sudden train of thought.

"The English wars," he repeated, with a catch in his voice and a brightness in his eyes; "the English wars—Chinon. Then you must have seen the Maid."

"Seen the Maid! Yes, bless me, yes," the old gentleman assented somewhat testily, for he appeared to regard Villon's curiosity as a digression from the interest of the narrative. "But in truth I never saw much of her, for I had never a great stomach for fighting and chose rather to keep in attendance upon the King and share his commons, short or long. Besides, I never thought much of the wench, being of my lord of Tremouille's party, and she seemed to me, who had a nice taste in pretty women, to be something of a plain peasant girl.

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But we did not come here to talk of the Maid, I believe."

Villon's interest in the old lord, fairly brisk from the first, was now finely lively. It whetted his irony to be chatting with one that had seen the Maid and thought her no more than a plain peasant girl and found her no very interesting topic of conversation. He thought of that old soldier of Lahire who had taught him sword-play and bow-play, and of the old soldier's raptures over the Angel of France, and he admired the powers of Providence that could create such different creatures and let them all be called men. But he saw that the old gentleman was vexed, and he placated him with a smile and an apologetic gesture.

"It was many years after the English wars," the elder went on, "and at a time when I had scattered my patrimony and beggared my credit, that I first saw the fair Yolande. She was the daughter of a rich burgess of Paris; she was lovelier than any lady at court, and every gallant at court was mad for her favour. I was not then in the first flight of youth, but I was still a lively amorist with a good memory for other men's verses, and I paid my court with the rest. It was an idle thing for me to do, being penniless, but I tell you she was so lovely that Diogenes would have rolled out of his tub to run after her, and what am I to be wiser than so wise a master?"

The narrator paused, and Villon, not knowing what precisely to say, murmured: "What, indeed." This seemed to satisfy the lord of Little House, who resumed his tale.

"However, a greater than any of the gallants had set his mind upon Yolande, and that was the then Dauphin, that is now King. Far be it from me to deny my prince's charms of person, amiabilities of character, and graces of carriage. Yet, as I recollect, we were a little surprised that so beautiful a maid should prove so pliant with him."

Villon thought of King Louis's appearance, remembered all he had heard of his dauphinhood, and wondered too. His companion went on.

"Of course there were people who said unpleasant things. There always are persons ready to whisper scandal against great princes, and it was commonly reported, and believed by those that love to believe evil of kings' sons, that the lady's pliancy was not so much the result of inclination as of constraint. In a word it was bruited abroad, behind lifted hands, that the Dauphin had lured his beauty into a snare, that he wooed more by force of arms than otherwise, and was rather a lover after the fashion of Sextus of old Rome. Of all this I know nothing. The lady never told me aught, nor had I ever the bad taste to ask her. But on a day one came to me, an emissary from the Dauphin, who asked me plumply if I would marry Yolande and carry her into the country. Would I marry her! The fairest woman I had ever seen. And what was I to quarrel with my prince's taste? The Dauphin's man was very explicit with me; I knew what to expect, but I made no demur. She was my heart's desire, sir, that I never thought to win, and now I could gain her thus that could gain her in no other way, and besides do a service

to my lord the Dauphin and save him from grave scandal, for King Charles had grown prudish in old age, and of a prickly humour with his son's peccadilloes. I married Yolande; I settled down at Petitmanoir, the last of my estate, with mended fortunes, and soon enough our union was graced by a daughter, of whom the King is very fond. Yolande did not live very long, but I do not think she was unhappy, for I have an excellent memory for pieces of verse and a smooth voice in their recital. Some people would have it that she had lost her wits, but that was all nonsense. She was merely gentle and submissive and not given to much speech, which is scarcely a defect in a woman. I assure you my marriage is one of the pleasantest memories of a long and pleasant life."

Villon looked into the bland pink face, and listened to the bland calm voice with a kind of fascination. He had known some old folk in Paris, but at the moment the strangest fellow that ever was free of the Court of Miracles seemed insignificant in comparison with the lord of Little House. In the distance, from the ivy-shadowed door of the tower that served for dwelling, he saw Loysette appear with bottles and cups in a basket. Had she lingered of set purpose, he wondered, to give her guardian leisure for his narrative. Doubtless!

CHAPTER XII.

THE BALLADE OF LOYSETTE.

"Was Yolande as lovely as Loysette?" he asked, watching the girl as she made her way towards them through the summer flowers.

"I think she was lovelier," answered his host, "for the girl has a kind of fierceness that was not in her mother."

Even as he spoke the girl had come up with them, and now she set out the contents of her basket on the little table, two bottles of Poitou wine, a white and a red, and a brace of silver cups. The old lord asked his guest which colour of wine he fancied, and when Villon elected for red, filled his cup and took a cup himself, and pledged his guest with great courtesy. Then the girl, that had said nothing till now, but still stared at Villon, broke her silence.

"Well," she said, with a little show of white teeth as if she snapped at him; "well, are you going to rhyme me some verses, or are you brisker at promise than performance?"

The lord of Little House raised a chiding hand

in deprecation of the girl's vehemence ; but Villon laughed merrily, for the flash of her dark blue eyes amused him.

" You shall have your verses, Mistress Loysette, and that in this very instant if I have any skill or wit for jingles left in me."

He drained his cup as he spoke and looked steadily at the girl, who gave him back his gaze and took on her most gracious carriage, as if she were posing before a painter. Villon cleared his throat.

" It shall be a ballade," he declared, " the Ballade of Loysette." And then he was silent for a few seconds, catching at his rhymes, that they should be the net to snare his thoughts in. Suddenly he began :

" The angels blended bowls of cream
With pulp of cherries newly shed,
To make a damsel like a dream
Of perfect white and perfect red ;
Of lily blooms her skin was spread,
And on her cheeks the roses met ;
No pains the angels spared, 'tis said,
To make the maid that's named Loysette."

Villon paused, and the girl clapped her hands gleefully. " That's a good beginning," she cried, " I hope there is better to follow." The old gentleman nodded approvingly.

" You have a ready trick of it," he declared, and then reminded Loysette that there must be more to follow by the laws of the ballade.

" Go on, go on," the girl entreated, or rather commanded, and Villon, who had taken advantage

of the pause to cast about him for new ideas, began again.

"Now naught save jewels serve my theme ;
Lo, on her lips two rubies wed,
And in her eyes two sapphires gleam,
While little pearls desert their bed
To slumber in her mouth instead ;
Her ears are shells, her hair is jet ;
No pains the angels spared, 'tis said,
To make the maid that's named Loysette."

Again Villon paused, and again his audience gave him applause. The elder protested that it was "excellent, very excellent indeed," and averred that it would give him much pleasure to commit it to memory. "My head, sir, is a treasury of mellifluous verses."

As for the girl, she glowed with pleasure, her bosom swelled, her eyes swam, and she laughed as blithely as a child that has been given a new toy. "Little pearls desert their bed," she repeated, finding much satisfaction in the line, and approving it by a liberal display of her fine white teeth. In truth she was a very handsome creature as she stood there, and Villon declared that a better poet might well be puzzled to do her justice.

But now the girl seemed to think it was time to make a complaint lest her laureate be surfeited with praises. Facing him audaciously she spoke.

"You have praised my face with as much pains as your angels took to make it. But a girl is not all face, and I think there is more of me to praise if your ballade have space and your wit breath."

Villon laughed anew.

"We are almost strangers, Loysette. I spoke

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but of what I saw and knew. Now my Muse must chirrup by guess-work. But, as in philosophy we argue from the known to the unknown, so shall she, and it should be no hard task for her to make a fair case. Have at you anew."

Then almost on the instant he began to rhyme afresh :

" If charms displayed such marvels seem,
What of the body finely bred
For fine delights, Love's Academe,
Divinely curved and crescented,
That lies between her heels and head ;
On earth queen Venus lingers yet.
No pains the angels spared, 'tis said,
To make the maid that's named Loysette."

The girl gave a little gasp of satisfaction, and made as if she would speak, but the Little House lord uplifted a hindering finger.

" Patience, child," he commanded, " there is yet, by the laws of the ballade, the envoy to come."

And indeed, even as he spoke, the envoy came.

" Prince, if you seek love's wine and bread,
Here is a feast before you set ;
No pains the angels spared, 'tis said,
To make the maid that's named Loysette."

Villon made the glowing girl a little reverence as he spoke the last words, but she, blithe with delight, ran forward, and clasping François in her strong young arms, gave him a sounding kiss. The old lord rubbed his hands pleasantly and whistled a skittish tune.

" There," cried Loysette, as she released Villon from her embrace, " that is what you should have asked for as guerdon of your verses, but durst not

because of her who sits by your hearth. But, indeed, I will give you more if you like, for you have kept your promise bravely."

Now for all that Villon was a reformed character he was still of red earth, and the girl's kisses and the clinging of her warm body made his flesh tingle and his pulses brisk. Once again, over all the sweet scents and fresh winds of the garden, seemed to sweep the clogged clouds and heavy vapours of the Fircone Tavern, with their memories of the shifting easy pleasures denied to one that had closed his fingers upon a star and found that its white fire burned his palms. So it was with something of an effort that he let the girl slip from his arms while he spoke, jestingly.

"Alas, Loysette, you have overpaid my ragged rhymes. Maybe I shall beat them into better shape at leisure."

Loysette looked at him demurely through lowered lids, between which her blue eyes gleamed indeed like sapphires.

"Why, if you are for any changes," she said, "then let me give you a hint to help you. I would have you change that word 'maid' that you ring on so often in your overword. Indeed, I am a maid now, but I shall not always be one, I trust, unless the world has grown more foolish than it was. But I hope I shall always be beautiful, as woman and wife, and I would have my verses serve me truly then as now."

Villon looked at her with a sudden ache at his heart, those words of her about always being beautiful stabbing him like needles. There was

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the heart's cry of fair womanhood, there the eternal hope, and behind it the eternal denial. His old rhymes came surging on his mind with their defiance and their despair.

" Daughters of pleasure, one and all,"

it began with its praise of women's bodies and its wail because of the beauty that must wither. No wisdom would ever make him watch that tragedy with calm, would ever make him accept with resignation the decay of such fair creatures.

" For soon the golden hair is grey,
And soon the body's lovely line
In withered meanness slipped astray."

He could hear Huguette's voice singing it, and he thought of all the comely light o' loves he had known, "of form and feature delicate," who, if they lived at all now, would make him shiver with pity, and as he thought it seemed to him as if before his very eyes the girl Loysette underwent a horrible change, her smoothness wizening into wrinkles, her plumpness shrivelling and yellowing, her bright keen colouring tarnished and shamed, all that was divine, all that was desirable scorched out of her. He longed to cry out to her to use her brief hours before it was too late, to love ere love should fly beyond recall. He felt deadly cold in the warm air, and to banish the damning chill he filled and drained another cup of the elder's generous wine. The juice thawed his rigor, physical and spiritual. He saw the girl again as she was, comely, young, simple in audacity, and he felt wistfully grateful for such cheer as the drifting

years could give—wine, and fair faces, and talk, and energy, and snatches of song. And love? Was he not happier in those days of stain and vagrancy, when, kisses lightly given and taken, love came lightly and went lightly, and no dawn could promise in whose arms the dusk would be welcomed, than now in the prison of his triumph, the pillory of his joy. If he were free, here were a fair maid to snare a vagabond caprice, and perhaps chain it with roses for aye.

Good Lord! he was idling in the old, sentimental byeway, he that had done with sentimentality and rascality, and was doomed henceforward to the highway and the plain course. With an effort he shook himself free of his muddy thoughts, but their cares must have been written on his face, for the lord of Little House laid a solicitous hand upon his arm and desired to know if he ailed, while the girl scrutinized him with a puzzled frown on her forehead and asked him why he stared upon her so strangely.

"Indeed," he protested, "I do not ail, sir; and indeed I do not stare at you, mistress. I did but lose my way for a moment in a fog of regret that I could not rhyme you a better ballade."

"If the ballade is good enough for me to prize it is good enough for you to write," said the girl stoutly. "I do not think the praise of any poet is as great as the woman's beauty that he praises, though I know very well that poets think differently. A woman myself, I stick to my belief, but I am well content with my verses, for they are my verses now, mine and none other's. I think I am

a vampire, lord of Montcorbier, and I have tasted a sip of your blood."

Therewith she kissed him again, and he knew not how to say her nay, and the old gentleman twittered cheerfully, and swore that the maid was a mad lass to be so free of her kisses. Thereafter in a little while Villon wished them farewell and set off on his way homeward, after many pledges demanded and given that he should visit Petitmanoir when his leisure allowed. No suggestion was made by father or daughter of any desire to visit Vaucelles-Tours or to be visited by its lady.

As Villon came to the heel of the hill, which, when rounded, would shut off the view of Little House, he turned and looked back. The maid was hanging on the ancient's arm and both were looking after him. Both waved their hands in salutation, and Villon saluted them in return ere he passed from their ken.

The girl's words buzzed in his ears. "I think I am a vampire and I have tasted a sip of your blood." Hers were indeed the teeth to bite a man's heart, hers the fingers to press it till it yielded its essence. But for him, his heart was bound about with bands of iron like the faithful fellow in the fairy tale. Encouraged by this reflection, he began to move at a brisker pace towards Vaucelles, and as he approached it became suddenly aware, something to his surprise, that he was whistling the air of a naughty little drinking song and kissing song that a girl, whose name he had forgotten, had taught him one night, long ago, in the reek and riot of the Fircone Tavern.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STONE AND THE POOL.

THE simile of the stone cast into the pool, with its ever-widening circles of ripples for result, is almost as old as the ancient hills. It existed, potentially if not actually, for the first man who ever picked up a pebble and pitched it into a piece of water. It must have delighted the first thinker whose mind was capable of seeing more in a natural act of playfulness than a stone and a splash. It must have exhilarated the scribe whose pen was first permitted to write the parable. Like many another weather-worn argument, it is still too good for unuse. It is yet current coin, legal tender, and saves the pains of barter. It is sound metal though its image and superscription be smoothed away with much palming and fingering; it rings true on the counter; it shall serve another turn.

When François Villon, late clerk of Paris and present lord of Montcorbier, flung his stone into his pool, he gave no thought to the displaced volume of water, to the aquatic disturbance, to the consequent inevitable far-reaching ripples, stretching in time to a seemingly distant shore and taking, even with soft, spent waves, some tribute of earth from

the indifferent banks. He had been very much in earnest on the Sunday morning when he had huddled the brown Franciscan robe over his bright array—for François had a merry taste in colour—and had said his say to the legion of the ragged and the damned that had listened to him with staring faces, hungry bellies and itching fingers.

He meant then, and he meant now, every word that he had uttered, glad words as they had seemed to the poor, and mad words as they had seemed to the rich, that heard them in the Cathedral place. His bowels yearned over them that were a-cold, over those that famine gnawed, over the maimed, the marred, the haggard, unhappy camp-followers of life's army. He had dreamed incoherent dreams of the brotherhood of humanity in drowsy hours of sunshine or fireshine. He had painted brain-pictures, with wine for his pigment, of a republic yet to be—a republic of equal justice, equal duty, and, as far as might be, equal joy. Sloven though he was, loose-liver though he was, felon though he was, he had read the Evangelists to better purpose than most of those that wore mitres. It was not his easy sentimentality alone that was stirred by suffering; the honest core in him made him as hot to help as hot to pity. There was never a time when he would not have shared his last coin with one poorer than himself, or done his little best to shield the weak from the oppression of the strong, the poor from the injustice of the rich. And so he had delivered his soul to the beggarmen of Poitiers.

Now Villon had collected that levy of beggar-

men cleverly enough. He had sent riders across country in all directions within the limits of the province, bidding each rider delay every covey of mendicants, swarm of gipsies, company of mountebanks, fellowship of beggar-students, alliance of pauper-friars, every seller of relics, every shower of sores, that he might meet with on the road. The messenger was then to proclaim, and did duly proclaim, to the astonished ears of every such mendicant, gipsy, mountebank, poor scholar and the like, that on the coming Sabbath there would be a dole and a giving of good counsel to every outcast, pariah, scapegoat, rogue and vagabond that should attend High Mass in the Cathedral of Poitiers—all this with the result already known to Villon as to us.

But what Villon did not know, though indeed he might have guessed if he had not been over busy with domestic cares, was that the regiment of reprobates so whimsically enlisted, once disbanded, drifted to all the quarters of the card, carrying with them the tale of wonder. To the confines of Poitou and beyond the confines of Poitou, north, south, east and west, ragged birds of passage, obscene and unclean, bore abroad reports of a great lord that was at war with his own class, which was strange; who gave silver coins to church-going runagates, which was stranger, and who preached a wild doctrine of a Heaven where the wretched were as welcome as the wealthy, and an earth where the beggar was own brother to the king, which was strangest of all.

Such tales multiplied on the many tongues of

rumour. Wherever a gipsy lit his fire, wherever a tinker plied his trade, wherever a beggar whined for alms, wherever a juggler stalked on stilts or jogged his bear, wherever a padaway friar passed a blessing, or a starveling student changed a curse, that had been of that congregation at Poitiers, there some story was told of the dole and of the sermon, there some seed was sown for the harvest yet to be. The honest rogues of that brotherhood made most of the sermon; the dishonest rogues made most of the dole; the wiser made equal use of both. As those gaunt scarecrows straggled further afield, tramping the highways in the pale of the dawn and climbing the hills in the red of the sunset, they left behind them a legend and a belief. The legend was that there was money for every man that kept Sunday Mass in Poitiers Cathedral; the belief was that, after all, the world was made for them as well as for those dreaded mysteries whom they called their betters, and that a great bell had now been rung to summon them to their inheritance. So news travels and changes form and colour as it flies.

On a certain morning the sun was speeding towards noon when Villon returned to Vaucelles from another visit to Little House. There was no harm, he assured himself and knew, in his visits to his neighbours. The old lord amused him; the girl had grown graver, demurer. Villon talked of poetry with the pink-cheeked ancient, and the girl listened to their discourse, or not, as the fancy took her. It all made a harmless change from the heavy air of Vaucelles, where Katherine brooded

over her wrongs. Under the conditions of his existence he knew that his absences aroused no alarm, and his returns no surprise to his household. All knew that it was his custom to be abroad early while his lady still lay asleep; all knew that he invariably returned in time to squire her at the noon-day dinner. But on this occasion Villon seemed to note that his return aroused even less interest than usual from the fact that there was nobody visible in the neighbourhood of the castle to offer him any kind of welcome. As he entered the great hall he learned the reason for the apparent depopulation of the province in the immediate vicinity of Vaucelles-les-Tours.

The great hall was full of people. All the servitors of the castle, and many of those that dwelt in cottages and hovels that nestled in its shade, were gathered together at one end, listening and staring for all they were worth just as if they were present at a play. At the end of the hall on a dais Katherine sat, richly habited, her chin propped on her hands and her eyes full of thought. In front of her stood a little group of strangely assorted persons. Two were big brawny fellows that were not so much clothed as partially covered by an agglomeration of rags and tatters, that hung somehow or other, as if in defiance of all the laws of adhesion and cohesion, upon their sturdy, sun-burnt, earth-stained limbs. This pair had their arms pinioned securely, even harshly, so Villon thought, who had some knowledge in these matters. By their side stood four tall men-at-arms with bills in their hands, and each of these men had a

little shield sewn on the stuff of his jerkin whose device was a gold padlock on a red field, quarterly with three keys of black on silver.

A little ahead of this group, and addressing himself to the listening Katherine, stood a man whom Villon did not like overmuch. This was the bailiff of the estate of Vaucelles, a fellow named Guillaume Cardon, that had been a kind of little king in the place during the long abeyance of any lordship at Vaucelles, and who had silently resented the coming that had lessened his authority. Villon had made it plain from the first to this fellow that Vaucelles was to be ruled by Villon's rede. The bailiff had met his intimation with supple acquiescence, and up to this time nothing had happened directly to justify Villon's dislike of the man. But François was too good a Parisian to be a bad reader of men's characters in their faces, and he felt sure that time would justify his opinion of Cardon. In another part of the hall a number of Villon's own soldiers and of the men-at-arms of Vaucelles were grouped together watching the proceedings intently. Indeed, so intent were all present upon what was going forward that no one paid any heed to Villon when he entered, and so he stood for many seconds an unnoted spectator.

The bailiff, it seemed, was on the point of concluding an address in which he asserted that the men there prisoners were deserving of the present penalty of death, and appealing to Katherine to give her sanction to the immediate carrying out of a sentence whose principal terms were a ready rope and the nearest tree. Katherine seemed to

hesitate ; the bailiff grew more insistent, and at that moment Villon, pushing his way through the soldiers that stood about the door, crossed the hall and took his seat by Katherine's side. She gave a little start when she saw him approach ; the bailiff's visage seemed to darken and lengthen ; the prisoners showed no change on their sullen faces.

" Dear lady and wife," said François, as he took Katherine's hand and kissed it, " what is this business which seems to call for such stern measures ? "

" It is a grave case of felony," Katherine answered with a slightly heightened colour, for she thought she detected a faint note of irony in Villon's question. " Master Cardon has told it all to me, but since you have come let Master Cardon tell it again."

Villon turned his gaze upon the bailiff and thought him a more forbidding rascal than usual. It had not increased his liking to hear him pleading so eloquently for the incontinent hanging of the prisoners. Villon had been too near to hanging, time and again, to feel over friendly to hot advocates of that form of punishment. He looked at the captives and could see very well that his coming had kindled no hope in their hearts. He could read their dull, slow thoughts as plainly as if they had been written fair on a page of parchment. They might have little hope of pity from a great lady ; they could have no hope at all from a great lord.

" Aye, aye," said Villon, " let Master Cardon tell the tale again, by all means."

Thus commanded, the bailiff began to recapitu-

late. He had come across these gallows-birds an hour before on a distant part of the estate, where they were engaged in the hideous crime of eating the flesh of a deer that very plainly they had themselves trapped and slain, for one of the party carried an old crossbow that had been newly used, and a bloody bolt lay on the grass by the side of the rude fire they had kindled. On the appearance of the bailiff and his men the villains had taken to flight, and having attained the high-road, might very likely have made good their escape if it had not been for the aid of certain retainers of the lord of Grigny that came upon the scene, and into whose arms the culprits ran. Whatever little matter of difference might exist between one great lord and another, all great lords were united in their hostility to slayers of deer and such like marauders that were enemies of their common interest. Under those circumstances he, the bailiff, had no hesitation in soliciting and obtaining the aid of the men of Grigny to bring the rogues to Vaucelles. If he had not hanged the rascals out of hand, it was because he wished to make proof to his liege lady of his vigilance in her behalf. He ended again as he had ended before, by appealing to the lady of Vaucelles-les-Tours to command the instant execution of the knaves.

Villon heard the bailiff out with an unchanging face, and when he was done, turned to Katherine and spoke to her in a low voice.

"Are you so hot, sweeting," he asked, "to have these poor devils hanged. Perhaps there is something to be said, even for them?"

The expression of Katherine's face bore witness to some stress of emotion. She had been embarrassed by her husband's absence when the bailiff had first brought in his captives, and had requested her presence in the great hall to sit in judgment upon them. But as one who came of a race of rulers, as one whose instinct was to rule, she soon found herself ready to hear and weigh what was said before her, and she entertained no doubt as to the infallibility of any decision which she might deliver. While she was in this state of mind the return of Villon seemed only to afford her fresh embarrassment by setting her back into the same condition of uncertainty in which she had entered the hall to hear the first case which she was called upon to decide as Lady of Vaucelles. Now she looked steadily back into Villon's questioning face as she answered him.

"These men have sinned grievously against laws of castle and laws of forest. It is not I who make the laws, but it is my duty to enforce them. Where should we nobles be if we did not keep these people in check?"

Katherine spoke what she felt when she voiced her adhesion to the spirit of her order. It never had occurred to her, as, indeed, it hardly could have occurred to her, that the supremacy of great lords was not essential to the welfare of the world. But she spoke more strongly than she felt when she emphasized the necessity of enforcing the penalties of the law. She had been casting about for some means of foregoing the extreme penalty without surrendering her feudal rights, when the unexpected

entry of François, and the irony she fancied in his voice, had stirred in her a sudden spirit of antagonism. François listened to her with great gravity.

"What you say is very true," he agreed; "these men have offended against laws of castle and laws of forest made before our day. But all laws are not just laws, and even against just laws those that offend may still have something to say for themselves. Shall we grant these poor rogues a chance of self-defence?"

He watched her very earnestly while he spoke, wondering whether she would remember how often the man by her side had been at grips with the law and in jeopardy of the gibbet, and, if she remembered, whether the thought would soften or harden her. She did remember, and she grew cold at the remembrance she would gladly forget. But she reflected that if he was once an outlaw, he was so no more, by the saving grace of a patent of nobility, and her heart was touched by his generosity to those in hard case. So she answered slowly: "As you please, my lord," and Villon, turning, looked thoughtfully at the two prisoners. Both had heavy, animal-like faces, with little sign of intelligence in eye or mouth; both seemed downcast to hopelessness, as resigned to their fate as sheep or oxen in the killer's yard. One of the pair, however, seemed to Villon, who was skilled in the reading of criminal faces, a little less brutish than his fellow, and to him therefore Villon addressed himself.

"You," he called, "you with the straw in your

shoes, come forward a little, and let us change a few words together."

Both men stared stupidly at Villon, but the one thus summoned, realizing that a great lord ordered him to do something and that no one hindered him in the doing of it, shuffled clumsily a few paces forward and stood still, looking furtively at the ground or to the sides, or anywhere rather than at the face of his interrogator.

"Tell me," said Villon, in a voice whose kindness was strangely unfamiliar to the poor wretch's ear; "tell me, why did you kill the deer? Were you hungry?"

A heavy groan broke from the prisoner's lips, a sound at once of hunger and despair. "I am always hungry," he said, hoarsely, and let his chin fall upon his breast. François felt his vitals wring him.

"It is a harsh lot to be hungry," he said. "Perhaps you do not know the forest laws. Perhaps you have never heard that it was death for such as you to kill a lord's deer."

Now Villon questioned him thus in the hope that the man might pretend an ignorance little less than impossible, when the wretchedest, the vilest, the most ignorant, knew that it was generally death to them to do anything to keep themselves alive. Still, if the fellow professed ignorance, there were a pretext for leniency. But the culprit had not wit enough in him to snatch at this straw.

"I knew it was death to kill a lord's deer," he muttered sullenly, and made as if he would have said more but that his heart failed him. Villon

noticed this, noticed also that the bailiff was grinning with satisfaction, for he had seen the drift of Villon's interrogation, and rejoiced in the confession that baffled it. Villon scored a mark against the bailiff's name in the account-book of his memory and again addressed himself to the captive.

"If you knew that it was death to kill a lord's deer, why did you risk your life so lightly?"

The man gave a growl, like that of a trapped wild-beast.

"I told you that I was hungry," he gasped, "and besides, I hoped——" Again he seemed unable to continue, and again Villon encouraged him.

"Well," he asked gently, "what did you hope?"

The answer was rather surprising.

"I hoped that things had changed here."

Villon leaned back a little in his chair, puzzled at this reply. The bailiff's mean face puckered with curiosity. There was a little stir among the folk against the wall and the soldiers by the door. Katherine, who had been gazing straight before her, now turned suddenly her look upon her husband and clasped her hands tightly together. Where all the others merely wondered, she began to dread.

"Why," Villon asked, "did you hope that things had changed here? The forest laws are much alike everywhere, and things change very slowly in Poitou."

The man shuffled his straw-bound feet together nervously for a few seconds, and then began to explain awkwardly, as one that has some difficulty

in telling a plain tale, or in putting one idea after another in anything like due order.

"I met a man on the road," he said slowly, "a big man that was on the southern tramp. He told me of marvels that were happening in Poitou."

The man came to a halt again, looked down on the floor and worked his feet uneasily.

"What marvels were these?" Villon asked in all simplicity. If he had glanced at Katherine her set face and frowning forehead might have helped to enlighten him, but all his attention was given to the prisoner.

The prisoner gave a helpless shrug of his pinioned shoulders.

"It was all a fairy-tale, I suppose," he confessed pathetically, "all lies. But it sounded like the Second Coming as he told it. There was a great lord in Poitou that sat at the church door in Poitiers and gave every honest beggar a silver penny to palm, and there was one in a friar's robe that preached how all men were equal, poor or rich, sick or sound, and how all goods were to be used in common from now till Judgment Day. That is what he said, as well as I remember, and I believed it when I listened, but now I know it is not true, for I thought the deer was as much mine as another's, and now I must hang for my thought."

If the man so speaking had suddenly freed his arms from their bonds and with his clenched fingers had fisted Villon in the face he could not have hurt him or shamed him more. For he had never thought of what might happen from those words

of his on that wild Sunday, nor of how they might be interpreted by wretched men with empty bellies and empty brain-pans. He had delivered his soul, indeed, but he had forgotten the delivery, much as the governor of a gaol forgets within a little the liberation of some troublesome prisoner. There is an intoxication of words as strong as the intoxication of wine, and Villon's brains were easily set a-swimming by the one as by the other. What was he, to play the Apostle of a new law to the despised and rejected of the children of men?

He turned to Katherine and saw her face hard as marble, vacant as an image that must wear the same show for ever. He looked at those that peopled the hall, and he saw on all faces a like air of decorously-wardered mirth. To them it meant only that a good joke, like a bad sword, had wounded its master. To him it meant an agony of self-reproach, staggering, shattering, titanic. Yonder miserable thing had been duped by his speech, pinioned by his fingers, came nigh to being hanged by his noose. Horrified, he sprang to his feet.

"Master man," he cried, "if it was your bolt that killed the deer, I think it was my hand that loosed the string. Wherefore, if I would not judge myself I may not judge you, so I bid you go free, and I give you God-speed, you and your mate, and you shall have a silver penny apiece for the sake of your faith in the Kingdom of Man."

At this speech the captive stared and knew not what to say, being in doubt whether the great lord were making game of him or no; and as for

his companion, he still stood mumchance and spoke no word, but looked with leaden visage on the ground. But the bailiff was quick to see that Villon meant what he said, and no less quick to lift his voice in protest.

"My lady," he cried; "my lady, this is an ill course to follow, and more ill may come of it. For if these twain be pardoned, how shall the next pair be hanged, and the next, and the next, and the next. I beg you to say nay to this folly."

He addressed himself, insolently enough, to Katherine alone, as if she had the only say in the place, but Katherine paid him no heed and sat rigid in her high chair looking fixedly before her. Then the bailiff made to address her again, but before he could get six words out Villon quitted his seat and taking him by the collar, for he was now in a great rage, shook him as a housewife shakes a dusty cloth.

"Master bailiff," he cried, while the man struggled in his grip, "if you do not take the time of the day from me it is you that shall serve for hanging, and I think that few eyes would weep themselves red to see you swing."

He pitched the bailiff from him as he spoke, and the man staggered a little ways across the hall and fell in a heap. Villon's soldiers laughed heartily, for they liked to see that their little leader would stand no nonsense. As for the folk of Vaucelles, though none of them grinned on their faces, they all of them smiled in their hearts, for every man and woman of them hated the bailiff as decent folk should, though they did not dare to show as much

because he was still alive. Then Villon turned to Katherine and made her a bow.

"Am I not right, Kate," he cried; "are we not of one mind in this business?"

He spoke confidently, but there was an ache at his heart none the less, for if Katherine should say him nay in this matter it would be hard for him and her to keep house together. But of one thing he was resolved: the deer-stealers should not swing, though, as the price of their safety, he should have to assert a right to the lordship of Vaucelles which, perhaps, as it might turn out, he did not possess, or else have to ride away with his merry men at his heels, and see what sport the devil yet had in store for him.

As it happened his confidence was, as it were, sanctified. Katherine, looking directly at Villon, said quietly:

"What my lord wishes I wish, for my lord is lord of Vaucelles, and of those that dwell therein, and it should go ill with those that shall gainsay my lord."

Thereat the bailiff scrambled to his feet, very hang-dog, and began to dust himself, a ridiculous figure. And the moment that Katherine had ceased speaking Villon had jerked out his dagger, and with no more ado had cut the cords that bound the two prisoners, and stood by while they rubbed their sore arms and stared at him and at one another as if they could not rightly understand what had happened. Then Villon gave each of the men a silver penny, as he had promised, and ordered that they should be given somewhat to eat and drink,

and thereafter suffered to go on their ways, without let or hindrance. And when the poor things were for kissing their rescuer's hands he denied them very courteously, and asked their pardon if he had in any wise wronged them, and bade them begone and remember that they were men and God's children.

So they went their ways speechless with gratitude and stupid with surprise. And the bailiff, sneaking from the hall, was warned by François that the pardoned men were fully pardoned, and no further to be vexed by him. The bailiff nodded sulkily and went his way, eager to pay his master out for a humiliation, and hoping to be able to do so by reason of a certain knowledge of his. To make assurance surer, however, Villon called Bertran, and bade him see that the given orders were duly carried out and the poor rogues set safely on their way. As for the men from Grigny, they were given wine to drink and a coin to pocket, and went their way thinking very well of their master's enemy, though they counted him something of a milksop to be so stirred over the hanging of a pair of Jacks. So the great hall cleared and the unwonted bustle subsided, and in a little while the servants were busy with the trestles and the boards, setting the tables, and it was time for the lord and lady of Vaucelles and their household to sit companionably at meat.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FIVE FRIARS.

THE meal was scarcely a cheerful one. Below the salt folk whispered cautiously of the events of the morning, and commented with reserve upon the action of their lord and the compliance of his lady. Above, talk flagged, and mirth seemed gagged. Katherine kept resolutely silent except when she was spoken to, and seemed to strain under the yoke of strong emotions. When her husband or another addressed her she answered quietly and briefly, with a courtesy which, while it did not forbid, did not encourage further adventures in conversation. Villon did his best to be nimble and sprightly, with but indifferent success, for Katherine's women, whether from fear or from respect, followed the example of their mistress and chose a fish-like muteness.

Villon would have felt something chilly in his isolation were it not for an unexpected ally. Oddly enough, help came to him from the chaplain of Vaucelles, from the quiet, shy, absent-minded old priest whose contributions to the speech of meals were for the most part limited to the grace before meat and the grace after meat. It was his wont

on most occasions to sit dreamily reflective, indifferent to the chatter and babble about him. But to-day, whether because the unusual silence made him feel almost as much at ease as if he were alone, or because he felt a duty imposed upon him by the reticence of the others, or because he was informed by an overmastering desire to deliver his thoughts in words, certain it was that he began to discourse to Villon upon a subject which just then much absorbed him.

That subject was gunpowder. In the course of those chymic studies, which occupied all the large leisure of the excellent ecclesiastic, he lately had devoted much of his attention to the better composition of blended saltpetre and charcoal, and it was the result of his investigations that he now began to air, undepressed he alone by the clammy silence which strangled mirth in the hall. Katherine paid him no more heed than she had paid to anyone else. Had she weighed the matter at all she might have decided that there were themes better suited to a venerable cleric. As it was, she suffered him to ramble on unchecked, while the ladies yawned wearily behind duly-lifted fingers, and wished the dreary meal at an end.

Villon, who was always interested, or who could always feign an interest, in any subject on earth, gave the old man at first a respectful hearing, which gradually quickened into a lively attention as the man of science set forth his hopes of increasing greatly the purity, and consequently the power, of gunpowder, and the results that might be expected if his anticipations were realized.

In the middle of a harangue bristling with technicalities, which Villon was far from finding altogether intelligible, the speaker was interrupted by Katherine, who gravely requested him to say grace. The cleric, suddenly startled back into consciousness that he had an audience of ladies, hurriedly relapsed into his habitual shyness, hurriedly murmured the Latin words of humility and gratitude, and the repast was happily at an end. While the humbler members of the party dispersed to their several duties, Katherine rose from her seat and turned to leave the hall. Villon made as if he would have accompanied her, but she stopped him with a prohibitory gesture.

"My lord," she said slowly, in a low voice so that only François heard what she said, "I desire to be alone for a while. I am tired and need rest. I have thoughts to think and need quiet."

"Kate," cried Villon, always sad to see sadness on her face, "are you vexed with me? Surely you would not have me do other than I did this day?"

She did not look at him; she did not answer his question; she only repeated the words that she had said before.

"I desire to be alone for a while. I am tired and need rest. I have thoughts to think and need quiet."

Then she turned and went her ways out of the hall, and her women followed duly after, and Villon remained in the hall, baffled and angry, watching the busy servants stripping the table and removing the trestles. The sight of a brown robe moving down the hall stirred his mood. He followed the

chaplain to his laboratory, listened to his theories, found real interest in his experiments.

There was one that noted Villon's departure and was quick to take advantage of it. This was Master Guillaume Cardon, the bailiff, that made haste at once to my lady's chamber and besought speech with her. Katherine granted him audience and the bailiff said his say. Ostensibly he came to entreat his lady's forgiveness if he had erred that morning in the excess of his zeal for the laws of castle and the laws of forest and the welfare of Vaucelles. Further, he desired humbly his lady's intercession with my lord her husband to the end that he, goodman bailiff Guillaume Cardon, might again smile in the sunshine of my lord's favour. Incidentally, however, he contrived, with a great air of seeming innocence, to insinuate the true reason of his visit. He let slip, as it were he knew not how, an allusion to Little House, affected to boggle over the fact that he had often seen my lord going thither or coming thence of a morning, and then pretending to fear all of a sudden that he had been indiscreet, tried clumsily to withdraw his words, and made thereby his malevolence more patent. Katherine cut him abruptly short, promised him her word, and dismissed him, he very well content with the use to which he had put his spying.

Now the day was well on the wane when Villon returned to the great hall, and being in no mood to go abroad, for the day was somewhat stormy, he ordered a fire to be made, and sat staring at it full of troubled thoughts.

Long he sat there in the deepening dusk, with his

legs thrust out before him, staring at the fire, feeling its heat upon the soles of his feet, upon the palms of his hands when he extended them to the blaze, warm, indeed, as to his body, but cold enough of soul. Once a servant came with offer of lights, but François forbade him angrily, and the intruder vanished in the distant blackness, leaving his troubled lord in outward peace. There were whispers in the servants' hall, there were grins, there were titters. Before that high tribunal knight and dame were daily arraigned, their secrets no secrets, their muffled differences unmasked, their deeds, their words, weighed, parodied, mocked, by critical inquisitors, who sometimes took sides, these for mistress and those for master, but for the most part concurred in a ribald caricature.

Knowledge of such comment had no share in the vexations that made the heart of François ache, the cares that curdled his blood. A master of lampoons, the can-companion of those for whom all life other than their own was but as a white wall on which to scrawl the epigrams of their obscene scholarship, he knew that in a mocking world even your champion mocker is mocked in his turn and lucky if only he be mocked behind his back. The wise man smiles at himself to toughen his hide. Perhaps François smiled now and then as he brooded there in the shifting firelight, but such smiles were rare and plaintive, more like to spasms of pain.

As the flames waned, log after log crumbling into a glory of glowing morsels and collapsing into the black and grey of ashes, the darkness in the great hall seemed to thicken, to close in upon the

man and his reverie like a moving wall. Yet to his fancy the little space of light and heat by which he was stationed seemed to expand, to change, to shift in a string of many-coloured pictures. He saw with resignation the poverty, the squalor that had been his childhood. He recalled with pity and irony the boyhood, driven unwilling and yet willing along the ways of knowledge, and wailing at the pains that buy latinity. He appreciated with sympathy a youth-tide, a man-tide of rascal jollity, of scandalous fellowships, of light fingers and loose speech. This youth-tide was ennobled a little by the high spirits that never flagged, though the winter's fingers pinched the seams of a thin jerkin and probed the rents in your leggings, nor failed though the provost and his men were after you with a rope and a running noose. It was almost sanctified, at least to him, by his mental leman, his Muse, who whispered him such nimble numbers and kept a lamp akindle on the altar of his heart. How long ago those naughty, merry times seemed to him, now so drolly ended by a kingly jest with its sinister gift of power, and its sinister promise of death and its whimsical chance of safety.

The flames rose, quivered, driving back a little the gathering gloom. Gazing into the flare he watched again the pageant of his ecstasy, saw himself minister of a king, favoured wooer of the far-removed woman, winner of victories; saw himself with his neck in the hemp, facing death in payment for his failure; saw himself in the white arms of the desired, with a royal voice pronouncing fortune, promising pardon.

The flames faded a little on the thought of that triumph. In the clarity of the conflagration he saw love, he saw passion too rapturous for present recollection. Had he indeed gained paradise, the gladness greater than dreams, only to lose paradise and be in the loss irrevocably ruined? Had the flaming sword fallen, not as of old, behind two creatures, exiled to death, yet in their doom together, but between two creatures, sundering loving bodies, longing souls for ever? He shivered as the flames dwindled, and the cowed, the cryptic shadows of old times, old thoughts, old deeds pressed in upon him, huddling closer together, seeming to encroach upon the waning light and make captive the musing man with their shadowy, impalpable arms.

Villon shifted uneasily in his seat, as if suddenly conscious of the oppression of the dying light, the menace of the marching dusk.

"Something should be going to happen," he thought. "How often, in Paris, on such an angry evening, I have stared at the yellow, threatening sky through the line of spires and towers and thought that the change of the world was at hand."

He shrugged his shoulders as if in protest against such fancies; his chin drooped upon his breast, his eyes watched without heeding the withering of the fire. How things had changed with him since his great day in the shadow of the gallows. He had won his love, he had gained a noble name, he was master of lands and castles, he that was once the ragged outcast, robber, drabber, drinker, who wrote rhymes between the cutting of a purse and the kissing of a quean. Why had the sweet life-

drink grown so bitter? The disdainful faces of great neighbours crowded on his memory; then suddenly left him alone with one beautiful scornful face, that had once shown kind and smiling. He drew himself up a little in his chair. "Something should be going to happen," he muttered wistfully.

A door opened and a servant entered the hall, stumbling his way through the unfamiliar dusk. As he drew near, Villon roused himself from his lethargy and rose, shaking himself as if to dissipate his sick fancies.

"My lord," said the servant, "there are at the gate certain worthy pilgrims to the shrine of Saint Radegonde who entreat permission to have speech with your seignioralty before they go on their way."

"Pilgrims," murmured Villon. "Give them the hospitality of the castle, which is always open to such holy men."

He smiled a little as he spoke, thinking of some of the so-called holy men with whom he had consorted in the dead days. But the servant had more to say.

"Monseigneur," he went on, "the hospitality of the castle was offered to these pilgrims in obedience to your known wish and the wish of my lady. But the honest pilgrims, one and all, refuse to eat or drink until they have been privileged to pay their homage to the master of this place."

To François in his weariness, in his ugly sense of isolation, any event that interrupted heavy thoughts was not ungrateful.

"Let the honest pilgrims enter and be welcome,"

he commanded. "Bring lights now. We must not play hide-and-seek with our visitors."

The serving-man vanished. Villon lifted some logs on to the waning fire and stirred the embers into flame with his heel. Then, as the sound of footsteps came along the outer passage he turned to greet the newcomers.

The servant entered first, carrying a torch in each hand. He was followed by a little group of men, all alike closely muffled in the sombre robes of wandering friars, all alike with their cowls so forward plucked about their polls that nothing of their faces was visible. While the servant was thrusting the torches into the sconces on the walls and sending flickering waves of light across the murkiness of the hall, the strangers slowly paced the floor till they came within a couple of yards of their host and there paused, a little knot of solemn figures, with folded arms and bent heads, in an attitude of patient humility. Evidently they were waiting for the lord of Montcorbier to address them.

"Reverend sirs," said François courteously, "you are very welcome"—he was going to say "to my house," but the form of the words galled him, and he said instead—"to this house."

He that seemed to be a kind of leader among the gaberdines turned his head and watched from the darkness of his hood the servitor busy with the torches, and waited till the man had done his task and left the hall before acknowledging the salutation of the master. Then he spoke, and his voice sounded high and piping, like the voice of a very

old man or the voice of a very young child, and though it seemed quite unfamiliar to Villon it instantly teased him by suggesting elusive associations that he was unable to shape.

"Erring brother," he began shrilly, with a phrase that amazed his hearer; "erring brother, we have turned aside a little from our true purpose of pilgrimage to the shrine of the blessed Saint Rade-gonde that we might ease our bosoms and heal perchance your spirit by addressing to you certain serious exhortations."

Villon was so ready to accept any diversion to his gloomy meditations that he was as much amused as astonished by the fashion of his guest's prologue.

"Good sir," he protested pleasantly, "I was not aware that my spiritual self was in such sad case that it passed the powers of our chaplain to handle, and cried aloud on the highways for the ministrations of the religious wayfarer."

The stranger wagged his hooded head from side to side lugubriously while Villon was speaking, and when he had made an end the man in the friar's habit resumed his harangue.

"Erring brother," he began again, "art thou so puffed, blown, swollen, inflated, distended, strained, extended, magnified, exaggerated, and in a word enlarged by the wind of thy conceit that thou dost truly believe thy case to be one with which an ordinary smug, sly, pampered, sanctimonious, flattering, fawning, crawling chaplain can grapple? If this be thy creed, dismiss it, dissipate it into air, for be assured that no such aid can avail thy need. It is not a single holy man that shall save thee from

thyself, thou wanton ; it will need the prayers, the supplications, the exhortations, the incantations of no less than five holy men to pluck the tares from thy wheat, and it is to this end that we have turned aside from the shrine of the blessed Saint Radegonde to wrestle with thee in thine affliction and deliver thee from the Prince of Evil."

As the shrill voice whistled this homily from the cavern of the cowl, Villon decided that the incident, whether mystification or intrusion, had ceased to entertain and begun to irritate. Was this some piece of impertinence devised for his humiliation by his neighbours ? He came a little nearer to the group of sombre figures, who seemed to sway, in uncertainty or trepidation, at his approach, and addressed them somewhat sourly.

"Hark ye, my sanctimonious padaways, I am in no need of your offices. You are welcome to my larder if you seek my hospitality. Ply your grinders freely, fill your skins with liquor, but wag your tongues no more for my admonishment. If the memory of my victuals prick you to remember me in your prayers, so be it, for a true man's prayers are serviceable and a bad man's prayers can do no harm, and so I give you good evening and good appetite, holy roadsters."

The manner of the master of the house made it plain that he meant what he said, but it had not the intended effect upon his hearers. Instead of their making to leave the chamber, as he expected them to do, after his decided words, the five remained huddled together, still swaying slightly as sturdy trees might sway in a hurricane. Then

yet again the one that acted as their spokesman uplifted his voice in a shriller squeal than ever.

"You are self-righteous, brother, you are self-vaunting, brother, you are self-opinionated, brother ; you talk freely of your victuals and your liquor, but it is said of you, and we fear truly, that since your elevation you have reneged old friendships, forgotten old friends, that you care not if they live or die, sink or swim, feed or starve."

Villon advanced upon the speaker with such gestures of menace that he and his fellows instinctively gave ground a little.

"You lie, rogue, you lie," he cried, forgetting all respect for the gaberline in his indignation. "My friends are my friends, last as first ; I never forget them, and I wish them well with all my heart."

As he shouted these words the swaying, the vacillation that he had already noticed in the carriage of his visitors, increased amazingly, till it became a vehement oscillation back and fro that threatened to imperil their balance. While he paused, checking his advance and his anger, to consider this curious phenomenon, a great roar of laughter volleyed at him, trumpeted as thunder from five sturdy chests, and compelling him to recoil with the very wind of the hilarity. Louder came the peals of mirth, more fiercely swung the nodding heads, the reeling bodies ; so might the gods have rocked with laughter on Olympus over the discomfiture of a mortal.

While those brays of extravagant gaiety were still dinning in the ears of Villon, while the roof of the

great hall rang with the cachinnation, and the farthest corners reverberated the blustering fun, making the place a very cave or temple for the boisterous Muse of Mirth, every man of the five shouters put a hand to his cowl, and, dragging it back sharply to his nape, revealed to the dumb-founded Villon five grinning visages of most familiar feature.

They lolled at him, leering, like faces in a Mystery, images of the sins. Lust, greed, thievishness, cunning, fraud, swaddled in those demure trappings, and tempered by a ruffian joviality, glared at François and howled his name through the very hurricane of their jocularity. He knew all their names, too, well enough, not the names that such faces should bear like a label in a Morality, but the names that they wore in the world, the names that had been given them by their parents, their companions, or themselves. Those names came easily to his lips now, they came even eagerly ; he was astonished to see the rascals, but also he was glad to see them. He flung forth his hands in greeting, and as the wolves in fleeces clustered around him, gripping at his fingers, clapping him on the back, clawing him on the shoulder, he named them by their names with cordial heat.

"René," he cried to Montigny of the Italianate face, the Italianate grace, who had played the friar in falsetto. "Guy," he cried to rotund Tabarie, as bluff, as red, as bald as ever. "Casin, Colin," he cried to the stork-like Cholet and the seeming amiability of Cayeux. "Jehan" was the last name he named, and the hand of Jehan le

Loup was the last hand he took. He never had cottoned to Jehan so much as to the other coppers. Yet he was glad to see him, glad to see them all. Through the gloom of his depression, his loneliness, their roguish faces shone like the faces of angels. They reminded him that he was alive, that he was awake, that there were grapes in Canaan. Here were solid hands to grip, jolly voices to hear, for one that had been fighting with shadows, that had been well-nigh stifled with shadows. Just for a moment he was back in the Fircone Tavern and glad to be back there.

"Well said and well done, bully poet," René de Montigny declared, in his natural voice, that recalled to François squalid, sordid, unhappy hours that he had not known were unhappy at the time, that had looked tragic enough in the light of his sudden happiness—the happiness that seemed now to be passing from his grasp. René was laughing still at the success of his deception, and he repeated anew some words of his pious predication in that well-feigned voice which had so bewildered Villon. François was laughing now as madly as the rest of them, laughing the louder because so short a while ago it seemed to him as if he had done with laughter for good. They made a fine noise in the old hall those six men crowing together: it was an astonishing concert.

CHAPTER XV.

A DISH OF TRIPE, AND ITS SAUCE.

AFTER a while the ebullience of mirth subsided, and then François was all afire to know what brought his comrades of old time so far afield from Paris as Poitou. But, hospitality overbearing curiosity, and well aware, without needless questions, that his guests were ever ready for mug and trencher, Villon first called for food and drink, and while it came he replenished the fire till its end of the hall glowed with a noble colour and radiated a kingly warmth. Then when the table was laden with viands and wine and the five hungry ragamuffins were setting to with a zest, Villon began his interrogation.

"What brings you to Poitou, hearts?" he queried, smiling over the rim of a cup of wine at the fellowship in pledge of greeting. The speech was addressed to all, but René de Montigny was the recognized spokesman. For the moment his mouth was too full for intelligible utterance, and he proceeded to minimize this difficulty by bolting his portion, dog-wise, and a fraction, which produced a fit of coughing and called for the consolatory contents of a couple of cups of wine to set things right again.

During this interlude Villon bridled his patience and amused himself by studying the demeanour of the other members of the gang who were grouped about the table. Guy Tabarie, characteristically, was chiefly interested in seeing how much good liquor he could contrive to hold. Casin Cholet and Colin de Cayeulx were looking about them in astonishment at the signs of wealth and comfort that the well-lit hall displayed, and were communicating to each other in hoarse whispers behind their lifted mugs their appreciation of what they saw from the standard of the plunder-market. Jehan le Loup had picked up a silver-gilt goblet and was weighing it thoughtfully in his hand while his furrowed brow and puckered eyelids indicated that he was calculating its potential value to the last guessable scruple. It was plain that only regard for an old friend's property, or, it maybe, respect for an old friend's fist, restrained him from slipping the hanap under some wing of his borrowed plumage.

Villon watched and grinned while René de Montigny cleared his throat. His nostrils seemed to inhale the heavy odours of the Fircone; his glance sought, almost unconsciously, for the damsels that had played the dangerous doves to these kestrels; one woman's image, quickening to the view of fancy, brought for an instant a twinge to his heart and a tear to his eye. It all seemed strangely long ago and far away, that day of degradation—it might have been written about by Virgil—yet here were his playmates of that knavish age seated at his board, drinking of his

wine, envying the evidence of his wealth ; and he had the right to call himself lord of Montcorbier and to wear clean linen as often as he pleased. It was a queer world, a humorous world ; that danse Macabré which he used to stare at when a lad on the old cemetery walls in Paris really rather under-painted the whimsicality of it all.

By this time René de Montigny was in talking trim, stomach full, gullet void and a vast tankard of wine in the fold of his fingers. He leaned across the table towards Villon and wagged his head playfully.

"What brings us to Poitou, you ask, Bully. I might tell you that we had found grace, sought and gained reconciliation with Mother Church, and were brisk in the fulfilment of vows of penitence. But you would not believe, for one thing, and you would be right, for another. We may look like holy men——"

"Not when your hoods are thrown back," Villon interpolated gently, to the joy of his hearers. René de Montigny went on.

"We may look like holy men when our hoods are drawn forward, but beneath the pilgrim's frock the ancient devil jigs unfettered, I promise you, as good a sucker of wine and swallower of tripe as ever."

"A dish of tripe's the best of all," murmured Villon, and sighed to think that he had never finished the magnificent ballade of which that line was the assertive refrain. Why, he had been hammering at it, had he not, on that very night in the Fircone Tavern when so many things hap-

pened? "A dish of tripe's the best of all." There was a moral in that if you chose to look for it; the dish of tripe a symbol of your heart's desire. Through his onion-scented reverie René de Montigny persisted.

"The cowl does not make the monk, brother Villon—I crave pardon; I take it that I should say 'Monseigneur' to your grace of Montcorbier."

Villon shook his head and waved his hand in dreamy protestation. "Always brother Villon to the lads of my gang," he answered, scarcely knowing what he said. He sat there, at the head of his own table, languorous, almost somnolent, enveloped in old memories to the extinction of new realities. His memories seemed to swaddle him, lulling his senses, dulling his apprehension of the actual, affording him a nebulous entertainment that was partly droll and partly melancholy like an ironic farce. René de Montigny clapped the table with his finely-formed, dirty fingers, applauding Villon's sentiment, and unaware of Villon's abstraction.

"Nobly spoken, brother Villon," he crowed. "There spoke a true Coquillard coquillarding, and one that does credit to the craft, mystery, guild, fellowship, league, covenant, and brotherhood of St. Nicholas his clerks."

René paused in his praises to fill and empty his flagon; then, refreshed and replenished, he took up his theme.

"You must know, Bully François, that if we wander so far from the skirts of our beloved mother, Paris, it is from no weariness of her sweetness.

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Nor did we undertake the journey solely for the purpose of visiting you in this mirifical manor of yours, seeing that we could not be very sure of finding ourselves welcome. But the chance of seeing you again, the chance of sharing your cheer, counted for something in spurring our resolution to say good-bye to Paris for a while."

René de Montigny made a pause in his discourse, and Villon, wallowing in his lethargy of retrospect, felt called upon to bestir himself and say somewhat.

"Why did you wish to quit Paris?" he asked dreamily. The wine, and his melancholy, and the appearance of his friends, had played whimsy with his wits. For his part he seemed to be in Paris, snugly hunched in the warmest corner that the Fircone offered, and his question sounded to his swimming senses little less than absurd. But it got a ready answer from René de Montigny.

"Our new career of arms, for which I think I may, without immodesty, say that we showed some aptitude, seemed to promise pickings. But in a twink King Louis makes peace, and we are at our wits' end again. For the trade of soldier in days of peace is a thin trade, a poor trade, a raw trade, a hungry trade, a thirsty trade, a sick, sad, silly, sorry trade for gentles of our kidney that relish six meals in the day and need wine sixty times in every hour. We might, belike, have joined the civic guard, that have some comforts, but plague upon the burgesses of Paris, they were made for us to plunder, not for us to protect. The position was illogical, ridiculous, not to be endured

by men of humour. Therefore we did not endure it; we retired into private life, proposing to live as of yore at the public expense."

René refreshed his parching jaws with wine, and smiled benignly at Villon, who scarcely heeded him, being now busy on that long-abandoned ballade in praise of tripe, and stalking his rhymes warily. René ignored his obsession and resumed.

"But Paris, alas, is not what she was for gentry of our fellowship. The King fidgets with the virtues, records new edicts, enforces old ones, would have no man live honestly by pilfering save himself. The Court of Miracles itself is not free from the perquisitions of Tristan. Sacrilege! So we decided that our health cried out for change of air, and for body's sake and soul's sake we pitched upon a pilgrimage to Poitiers. We will pay our devotions at the shrine of Saint Radegonde, we said, and incidentally we will visit little François that is now a great lord."

René came to a halt, and it was so plain that he expected Villon to say something that the poet shook himself for an instant free from the trammels of his ballade and the thoughts of tripe.

"Why did you pitch upon Poitiers?" he asked, with no great ring of interest in his voice. But the query was all that René needed to set him going again.

"While we were in the army we scraped acquaintance with a bragging Poitevin merchant, who now, by the way, is somewhat poorer than he was. He boasted much of the glories of Poitiers, and most of all of the shrine of Saint Radegonde,

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which, according to his story, contains in its treasury enough gold and jewels to make an honest robber—or five honest robbers—comfortable for life. Here was an enterprise worthy of our merits. Can you then wonder if soon after five wandering friars shook the dust of Paris from their shoes and set off on a tramp to Poitou ? ”

Now by this time Villon, cuddling his Muse, had succeeded, to his vast satisfaction, in getting the swing of his ballade, the run of its rhymes. For his purpose he divided a greedy world into three groups, those that loved fish, those that yearned after highly-pimented food, and those that were all for the delicate flesh of birds. He left your beef, your mutton, your pork, on one side of set purpose ; they were the every day staples ; it was against the rarer, stranger, costlier pastures of appetite that he would pit his perfect eating, his dish of tripe. Words hummed in his mind, rhymes drummed at his ears ; he hesitated, chose, rejected. In a twinkling it seemed ready to run off the reel. That is why, instead of answering the question contained in the last sentence of René de Montigny’s explanation, he slapped the table briskly with his palm and exclaimed in a voice that was charged with rapture : “ I have it.”

His old-time comrades stared at him. ^SGuy Tabarie, who had been drinking when François banged the board, choked and spluttered over his mug. “ Have what ? ” René de Montigny asked, never doubting but that his host was about to expound some scheme for the appropriation of the treasury of Saint Radegonde. It was with no small

disappointment therefore that he heard Villon answer gleefully :

“ My ballade of tripe, my longed-for, long-forgotten ballade of tripe. I had not thought of it for an age, but memory of it returned to me with your faces, and by Heaven and Earth here it is ! ”

Villon sprang to his feet as he spoke, and, moving a little ways from the table, began to declaim with as much fervour as if he were indeed again in the Fircone Tavern and about to delight his audience of rascallions with some fresh proof of his nimbleness in rhyme. He threw back his head, lifted his hands with a gesture of mocking apology for his conceit, and began :

“ Some gluttons rave in praise of fish,
The soused, the boiled, the salt, the fried,
Or dream of oysters on a dish,
Or prize a turbot in its pride ;
While eels by some are glorified,
And some for caviare call ;
But all-world-over, far and wide,
A dish of tripe's the best of all.”

As Villon thundered his burden his hearers trumpeted its blustering defiance in chorus, and “ A dish of tripe's the best of all ” carried the gastronomic challenge to the rafters. Villon went on :

“ Some folk, like Saul, the son of Kish,
Their scrips with simple fare provide ;
Whilst lusty jaws grow liquorish
O'er stews with spice and pepper plied,
And will by no means be denied
Your pickled relish, sour as gall ;
But by the moons of time and tide,
A dish of tripe's the best of all.”

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Again the poet paused, and again his fellows,
tickled by his whimsy, repeated his refrain merrily,
banging hanap and beaker, mug and jug on the
board. Villon took breath and renewed :

“ Some dainty stomachs have their wish,
With poultry and with game supplied,
And put apart with pooh and pish
All creatures with unfeathered hide :
They can no other meat abide
But turkeys large or plovers small :
For my poor person I decide
A dish of tripe's the best of all.”

Again the tankards rattled, again the table
groaned, again the insistent overword “A dish
of tripe's the best of all” floated to the ceiling.
Villon, swimming on the flood-tide of self-esteem,
changed his voice from assertion to persuasion as
he mouthed his envoy :

“ Prince with your princess by your side,
A-feasting in your golden hall,
Take honest Villon for your guide,
A dish of tripe's the best of all.”

A roar of voices exalted the last line with clamorous emphasis, and with the words “A dish of tripe's the best of all” echoing in his ears from every corner of the hall, Villon dropped into his seat again, and filling himself a cup of wine drank eagerly, while his boon companions bellowed the burden again and again, and shouted their praise in terms happily compounded of enthusiasm, humour and obscenity. There had been no such din within the grey walls of Vaucelles-les-Tours for many a long day, but the sudden tumult died a sudden death.

The shouters heard the sound of a drawn arras, saw Villon's jaw drop, and turning beheld in a framework of divided curtains the form of a lady they all knew well. Villon stared at the lady with a comical dismay as he admitted to himself that for the moment he had forgotten Katherine.

As Katherine moved slowly down the hall the five rascals scrambled hastily to their feet and greeted her with uncouth obeisances of which she took no notice whatever. Villon left the table and advanced to greet her with a deprecatory smile which he felt in his heart to be ineffective. After all it was no fault of his if some old and not very reputable friends had taken him unawares and had made more noise than was desirable in the enthusiasm of re-union. Villon would have wished to kick himself if he thought he could be ashamed of ancient playmates, gallows-meat maybe, but who had fought and fought well in the brawl with Burgundy. So he tried to put a good face on it, though he saw that Katherine was not in a pleasant temper.

"Kate," he said, with a fine false air of hilarity, "here be some old acquaintances from Paris that have taken us by surprise in Poitou."

As he spoke he pointed to where the five rascallions cringed and congeed, and where the majority of them tried to efface themselves behind René de Montigny, who, as the gentleman of the party, was thought best qualified to represent them to the lady of Vaucelles. Montigny thought so too and made a tremendous flourish of hand and arm as he moved a little way forward to salute Katherine.

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"Gracious lady," he began with Italianate assurance, "it is a joy to our eyes to behold again your loveliness. We would have travelled further than from Paris to Poitou, believe me, for such satisfaction."

Villon felt that the extravagant attitudes and language of Montigny were so much wasted energy and wasted air. He remembered rather dolefully a time when he believed René de Montigny to carry something of the grand manner. Now he thought that of the two, Tabarie, who stood stock still and said nothing, was the better man for carriage.

Katherine gave Montigny the ghost of a recognition, the shadow of a salutation, and addressed herself to her husband.

"I had hoped to find you at leisure," she said coldly. "I did not know that you were in the company of your familiars."

She was so frigid in her manner that Villon shivered as if he had swallowed an icicle. Katherine was generally more fire than ice in her angers.

"I am at your service, Kate," he began awkwardly, and knew not how to continue. René de Montigny plucked him by the sleeve.

"We are in the way," he whispered; "send us to the kitchen, or the buttery, or the servants' hall, where we can wait your leisure."

Villon thanked him with a nod. Entreating Katherine's patience for a moment he led his five comrades, now cowed again, and most devout of seeming, from the hall, each of the false friars making an awkward genuflection to Katherine as

he quitted her presence. Once outside Villon summoned a servant and bade him conduct the friars to a room where they might have lodging for the night, with fire and such eatables and drinkables as their hearts and stomachs might desire. Then, promising to come to them again by and by, he quitted his ill-timed guests and returned to the great hall. There he found Katherine sitting by the fire, with her chin pillared on her palms, staring at the blaze with such a brooding look in her eyes as made him fear that an ill wind was about to blow.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN ILL WIND THAT BLOWS NO GOOD.

KATHERINE did not move when Villon entered the hall. He drew a stool to the fire and seated himself beside her, but she kept her position unchanged. He reached out his hand to touch her hand and then she shifted herself a little so as to be less within his reach. He let his extended arm drop.

"Kate," he said tenderly, "what is the matter between us?"

"Everything is the matter between us," she answered dully, without turning her face from the fire. "Everything is the matter between us."

Villon essayed a smile that sat rather woe-begone on his troubled features. He knew Katherine well enough to know that she was in earnest.

"Is it so bad as that," he pleaded, "because I set two wretches free that killed one of our deer? I could be sorry for the poor beast, too, that liked his life well enough, I'll be bound, but the beast was dead and ended, and it would have whistled

no wind into his skin to squeeze the wind out of his killers. Nay, I'll swear you would never have had them hanged, Kate."

She turned now from her steady contemplation of the fire to look for a moment at him. Then she returned to the fire again.

"You think rightly," she answered after a little while. "I would not have had the men killed."

Then she fell into silence afresh, and Villon, finding some encouragement in her reply, thought to labour it to his advantage.

"Why, then, there is not so much the matter between us after all," he protested cheerfully, "if we think alike in this case."

Katherine shook her head.

"The men should have been punished in some way," she said slowly. "The forest laws that are made by us must be kept by us, and the deer we breed are not for the people's eating. The great folk must make the laws and the little folk must keep them, or the world would come to an end. But you could not punish these men, for you were more guilty than they."

Villon was somewhat taken aback by this attack, and not quite knowing what to say he unwisely said something, and more unwisely still said it jestingly, with a forced manner of hilarity.

"It is true enough," he declared, "that I have often been at touch and go with the King's justice, as you know very well, Kate, and may therefore naturally cherish a kind of pity for poor imps that fringe the gibbet. But the great have a right to pardon as well as a right to punish, else I should

not now be sitting here, and where we choose to pardon who shall say us nay? "

Katherine turned upon him again with a look of fierce reproach.

"It is simple enough," she said, "to pardon two poor rogues who kill a deer to stay their stomachs, but it is harder to pardon one that, knowing better, wantonly teaches them that beggars have a right to be thieves of other folk's gear, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

Her voice was even bitterer than her words, and for the first time Villon saw her drift. He tried to placate her.

"Are you still wrath with me because of my words at Poitiers?" he asked sadly. "They were honest words, Kate, and came from honest thoughts."

She interrupted him, swinging round upon him with a cry of anger that was almost a scream.

"Honest words! To tell Jacques and Gilles that they are as good as their masters! To tell thieves that the key of the Kingdom of Heaven is in their fingers, so that they need not pick the lock! To set the leper above the healthy, the sick above the sound, the ragged above the clad, the foul above the fair! Honest words!"

Villon stretched his hands to the blaze, and held them there till he felt the warmth upon his palms too scorching.

"A man can but say what he thinks, and I cannot and will not deny my sympathy with the miserable, my pity for the outcast."

"And for the outlaw," Katherine added

sharply. "I suppose a kinship for thieves is in grain with you when you welcome such guests to Vaucelles."

Inwardly Villon chafed at her ungenerosity, outwardly he wore the mask of patience.

"They are no guests of mine," he said quietly. "They came upon me unawares, playing the fool in friars' habits. But they were my friends once, and they fought with me for the King. Would you wish me to spurn them from the door?"

"I have no wish to hinder your choice of friends," she cried. "Heaven forbid! I suppose I could not if I would. But I trust you do not expect me to welcome, cherish, entertain your strange acquaintances, whether they be men or women."

Villon could not help laughing at the thought of there being anything feminine about the personalities of his five blades from Paris.

"Indeed, Kate," he protested, "they are no better than men, every clerk of them. But if they offend you they shall be jogging in the morning, for I think you would not have me deny them a night's lodging."

"I suppose your will is now law in Vaucelles," Katherine said sourly, "and I must bow to your bidding if you do not seek to make me bend too low."

"God forbid, Kate," Villon cried earnestly, shocked by the sound of her voice and the sting in her speech. "God forbid that I should ever offend you with any word or deed. These fellows, these friends, shall be gone to-morrow. They shall vex you no more, I promise you."

"And what of your friends of Little House?" Katherine said very softly, leaning somewhat towards him and scanning his face with a scrutiny in which mockery blended with scorn, "what of them?"

Villon was undoubtedly taken aback by her unexpected question, and he showed it by the quick flush of his cheek and the nervous clasp of his fingers.

"My friends at Little House," he repeated monotonously, and then trying to recover himself he framed a question in his turn. "What of my friends at Little House?"

"That is for you to tell me," said Katherine drily. "You come and you go; you walk abroad because a poet loves the morning and the free air and the loneliness of the woods. But your walks have Little House for goal. Are you in love with the King's bastard?"

François' cheeks flamed and he cursed his folly that he had never spoken to Katherine of his visits to Little House, or for that matter that he had ever gone to Little House. But it was too late to mend that now.

"I know something of the folk of Little House," he said slowly. "I came on them by chance, as one might say, and I have paid them a visit or two. I should have told you. I know not why I did not."

In his heart, however, he knew very well why he had not, because he had feared to kindle in Katherine such a fire as he now saw beginning to flame and crackle. Katherine looked at him contemptuously.

"What of the girl," she said; "what of the King's bastard; what of the mad wench? Are you in love with her?"

"You know that I love you and you only," François said sadly. In truth he was amazed by the strange sea of trouble that seemed to surge against him. Katherine laughed derisively.

"How should I know that?" she asked. "You have been in love a many times before you met me. Why should I hope to be the last of your favourites?"

Villon felt as a man might feel who, standing in a space of sea-down, suddenly saw the ground in front of him split and slip forward and reel into the water. Even so perilous seemed his position with the woman he loved. He knew well enough that when she lashed her fancies into passion it were easier to tame a whirlwind than to change her mood. Yet her charge was so grotesquely unjust.

"Who spoke to you of Little House?" he asked, and instantly felt the folly of his question as clearly as Katherine saw it.

"What does that matter?" she asked. "Do you deny that you are on friendly terms with its folk?"

"I have not denied it," François answered, "for it is the truth, and the truth has no harm in it."

"Perhaps," said Katherine slowly, "our thoughts as to what is harmful might not agree." She paused for a moment, then burst on him with sudden vehemence. "Is the girl your mistress?"

Villon looked at her aghast.

"No, no," he cried, "you cannot think that; surely you cannot think that?"

"Perhaps that is for by and by," Katherine whispered; "perhaps the girl is coy; perhaps she plays you." She pressed her lips tightly together and clenched her fingers. Then she suddenly shot another question at him. "Have you ever kissed her?"

For one moment Villon was tempted to juggle with his conscience and to answer "No," palliating the falsehood to himself with the reflection that, in strict truth, he had not kissed Loysette, because it was Loysette that had kissed him. Once he would have been ready enough to save himself from a tight place by worse ways than such a quibble. But with Katherine he could not do so.

"I wrote some verses for the maid," he admitted, "and she paid me with a kiss."

"You wrote some verses for the maid," Katherine mimicked him. "A pretty maid."

"She certainly is a pretty maid," Villon commented with a would-be jocularly that he instantly regretted and longed unavailingly to recall. For Katherine's cheeks flamed and her eyes blazed, and she glared at him like a beautiful fury.

"Am I to take your word for it that your kissable wench is a maid? A likely story told by likely lips. How is it that you have not brought this pretty paramour of yours to Vaucelles? You have provided excellent company for her to-night."

Villon sprang to his feet and stared at Katherine with a pallid face.

"What demon has possessed you, Katherine,"

he cried, "that you talk like this? There is nothing between me and the girl; I swear it by the Rood."

Katherine had risen in her turn and the pair stood facing each other, man and wife, lover and love, watching each other with wild eyes, wounding each other with wild words. "Why should I believe your word?" she screamed. "What words can bind you whose boast it is that you wish to break all laws? What oath can be sacred to you, who pretend that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a kitchen of thieves? What conscience can you have, who cause me to be shunned by all that should be my friends as if I were a leper, and then bring your bullies and ruffians from Paris to flout me in my own house?"

Villon tried to restrain her with an appealing gesture, but she was not now to be restrained. The madness of her passion spurred and lashed her, urging her wildly on an unknown course. All that she had suffered since her coming to Poitou; the slights and gibes of those that were of her order, and should have been her friends; the isolation, the dulness of the country days; the horror of Villon's doctrines, that seemed to her abominable beyond belief; the jealousy that had flamed from a spark at the whisper of Loysette's name, to a flame of hate at the confession of the kiss; all these injuries, topped by the presence under her roof of the men with whom Villon had thieved and drabbed and tippled in the shame and squalor of his life in Paris, had goaded her into a frenzy before which her self-control, her reserve, her very reason yielded like sand castles sapped by the sea. She raged up

and down the hall while she raved at him, and he stood strangely helpless before the madness of her anger.

"Katherine," he entreated, "Katherine, what would you have me do? I will send these men away——"

Katherine interrupted him before he could finish his sentence. "Send them away," she cried; "why should you send them away? They are the best company you can keep. They are of your true class; they think as you think; they act as you would have all men act. They are thieves, they are drunkards, they are profligates; so were you. Go back to them; let the dog return to his vomit."

Every poisoned word she flung at him seared his heart, yet not so cruelly but that he pitied her while he pitied himself. It was no doubt a wretched life for her, and she had lived it for his sake. Perhaps, if he caught her in his arms all would still be well and the tender rain of love quench these fires. He made a move towards her, but she seemed to guess his thought.

"Do not touch me," she cried. "Keep your caresses for your leman yonder. If you kiss me I shall kill myself."

Indeed, Villon feared that she was capable of any mad act in the mood to which she had now worked her uneasy spirit. He was not the man for such conjunctures. He was wholly at a loss, and seemed so patently, standing there baffled and unhappy.

"What would you have me do?" he asked helplessly, piteously. She caught at his words.

"I will tell you what I would have you do," she said, "I would have you let me be. If you have any spirit of chivalry in you, let me be. The King has made you my husband, the King has made you my lord, but neither the King nor you are master of my heart and of my soul. Let them be free. If you need kisses, seek them, find them, where you please, but leave my lips clean, give me the liberty of my body, the freedom of my spirit. I ask no more and I ask no less."

"Katherine," cried Villon in an agony of entreaty, but she would not give him time to speak.

"We must stay together; we cannot do otherwise. But if you will not let me live in peace you shall find that I know how to die."

"Lady and wife," said Villon slowly, "I give you my word that until your lips entreat me to kiss them, till your clasped hands supplicate my caresses, till your eyes woo me to desire you, you shall be unkissed, uncaressed, unsought by me."

He was mad with anger, but also he was very calm. He rather admired his attitude, and yet feared that it might be a trifle ridiculous. How would a really strong man have acted in his place, he wondered, yet was pleased to think himself dignified. The pair stood face to face for some seconds silent, breathing after that cruel bout. A crackling sound that might have been a cough and might have been a laugh disturbed them. They turned and saw a man standing by the doorway, a shabby man clad in shabby clothes.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE KING'S WISDOM.

KATHERINE and François were both on their knees in an instant, for both of them had recognized that the shabby man in the shabby clothes was their sovereign. But Louis promptly brought them to their feet again with a jerk of his forefinger and stood watching them for a couple of seconds with eyes that twinkled with malice.

"Ah, young lovers, young lovers," he purred, "still a-wooing, still a-toying, happy birds of paradise; 'tis a shame for the old crow to interrupt your philandering."

He rubbed his thin hands together as he spoke with a great air of paternal benevolence and good-humour which showed that at least he chose to pretend to believe what he said, though Katherine felt little doubt, and Villon felt none whatever, that he cherished no such belief.

"Ah," Louis went on, hugging his lean arms across his breast, as if he held captive there some fair woman, "it is good to be in love and to be loved. There is nothing like it in the world, as I remember, and he is like to find himself a thankless

guest who trips into Elysium with talk of a forgotten world and the foolish cares of men."

He cocked his head of one side as he spoke, and eyed the man and woman roguishly. Villon, for all his mortification, could not forbear to notice how very like a weather-beaten old bird his royal master did look.

"But so it is," the King continued. "The lips of lovers must sunder for a season, the fingers of love unclasp for a spell, to afford a meddlesome old monarch opportunity for a chat with a faithful vassal. We must steal your sweet lord from you for a little while, sweet lady. You shall find him all the more desirable for a little abstinence."

As he spoke the King advanced towards Katherine, and taking her by the chin, kissed her on each cheek with great gravity. Still holding her by the chin he turned to leer at François.

"Lucky fellow," he sighed, "for whom these peaches bloom, ever fresh, ever tempting, ever ready, in the orchard of delights; an orchard one would like to rob, if one were but love's schoolboy and not a weary old King."

Louis released his hold of Katherine and gave her a little pat on each of the cheeks that he had been praising.

"You may run away, sweeting," he said; "your mate and I must have a little gossip together."

Katherine swept his majesty a great reverence, and then, without giving a glance to her husband, quitted the hall. Louis looked after her, nodding his head.

"Aye, aye," he said, as if quite unconsciously

talking to himself, "a lass of high spirit, of very high spirit indeed. What a wonderful thing love is that can tame her so completely, hawk made dove, lioness lamb; a marvel."

Villon said nothing—as, indeed, there was nothing to say—while the King monologued. His mind was all a whirl, what with his quarrel with Katherine, in which it seemed to him that he had carried himself well; what with the echoing rhymes of his new-found ballade of tripe, which he dreaded to lose; what with the unexpected coming of the King. Presently Louis gave a quirk to his shoulders and shook himself as if he had suddenly remembered where he was. Then he shambled across the floor to the fire and seated himself in an empty chair, which happened to be the chair that Villon had been using. He motioned to François, with a clawing action of his right hand, to seat himself likewise, which Villon hastened to obey. He flung himself into the chair which Katherine had occupied, the chair still warm with the warmth of her body, and for a moment a fierce sense of physical contact made him feel as if he had lost a world. But the King's cunning eyes were set upon his face, and he pulled himself together and stiffened himself in his chair and muffled his care in a mask of deferential attention to what the King might say. And this is what the King did say :

"My lord of Montcorbier, being in Tours I could not deny myself the pleasure of a word with an old friend, so I slipped across to Poitiers, and so from Poitiers here. You have heard things, I suppose,

even in Poitou. Well, what do you think of your king now?"

"My king," said Villon diplomatically, and throwing an astonishing amount of fervour into the simple words, "is always my king."

Louis leaned forward and patted François on the knee, peering at him the while with cunning eyes.

"You are an astute young man," he said, confidentially, "and I think you will understand me when I say that I mean to be king. There are too many kings in France at this present. There is King Nemours, there is King St. Pol, there is King Armagnac, there is King Brittany, there is King Burgundy, and above all, there is King Charles, my good and loving brother. Here be too many kings for one country, friend, six crowns against one crown, and he that wears the one crown is the anointed sovereign. I must lower those other crowns, gossip François, I must lower those other crowns."

He threw himself back a little in his chair, rubbing his lean legs slowly with his lean hands and watching Villon's face cautiously. Villon could not help wondering how his royal master was to bring about the wonders he promised, seeing how hugely outnumbered he was both as to men and means by his enemies. His doubts may have shown themselves in his countenance, for Louis seemed to read them, though, indeed, it called for no mighty discernment to guess the thoughts that any intelligent man must harbour in such a condition of public affairs.

"I know what you are thinking, excellent Villon. You are thinking that the man who put his name to that bit of parchment yonder at Conflans is talking somewhat arrogantly now of his powers and his possibilities. 'Why did you sign that treaty?' you ask, 'if you think that France has too many kings. Why did you hand over Guyenne to your loving brother Charles? Why did you give Burgundy this and Brittany that, and Armagnac the other?' The answer is very simple, my dear lord of Montcorbier. I did all these disagreeable things for the best of all reasons, because I had to do them. It was giving up certain broad lands, or giving up the game. 'Well and good,' I see you riposte, 'but having given up all these good things to the greedy great lords, why do you now talk of France having too many kings, of meaning to be the one king of France?' Your point is good, friend Villon, your thrust is sure, and yet I have an answer for you. I gave up all those fair lands of the fair France that I love, for I do love it, Master François"—for a moment the King's voice quavered, and Villon felt sure that he was speaking truth—"because I could do no other nor no better. It was give up something, or lose everything, and I who may know little, but who, at least, know how to wait, chose to give up something till the time came when I might win everything. Do you follow my mind, gossip?"

Villon would have said something, he scarce knew what, but the King did not give him time to speak.

"Ah," murmured Louis, patting his thin knees

with his thin hands, "I may be a stupid fellow" —Villon grinned deprecation, and could thereafter have kicked himself for playing the courtier—"I may be a stupid fellow to fling so much away, but I think I did a clever deed in giving Guyenne and Aquitaine to my pretty brother. Just think of it, all that warm southern country to that amorous dandiprat, that lover of lutes and ladies, wine and women, songs and sweethearts. He ought to be as happy as a king down there, so happy that he may forget for a while his desire to be a king—and not be happy," Louis added with a sigh, which seemed to his hearer to be partly hypocritical and partly sincere. "Why, if I were just such a fellow as he I should ask no better fortune than to rule over that red earth, where the girls and the grapes are so ripe and round, where the sun is always shining and the birds always singing, and the fruits I speak of are always sweet in the eating and savoury in the recollecting. Why, if I were Charles, with his nimble wits, his smooth skin, and his ceaseless desires, I would sooner a thousand times be a careless duke of Guyenne than a careworn king of France. Are you not of my thinking, gossip?"

"Sire," said Villon, and felt that he was not courtier but honest as he spoke, "if my name were Louis, and I carried Louis' brain in my head, I would know that I could be nothing but king of France."

The King seemed far from displeased at Villon's contradiction of his suggestion.

"You are a lad of spirit," he declared, "and

one that it is pleasant to talk with. My little brother of Guyenne is my big difficulty in this business. England seemed bad, but for the hour England is out of court. While her great lords are brawling among themselves they have no leisure to interfere with the affairs of France, and a weary king is more or less free to do as he pleases in spite of their teeth. All these mutinous dukes of mine are as nothing by themselves. It is having Charles as their figurehead that makes them formidable; Charles the immediate heir to the throne, Charles the comely, Charles the courteous, Charles the complaisant. If I can but pick my little Charles out of that brood of vipers, and hold him of my side, I could look on in confidence and watch the others sting themselves to death. Guyenne is to Charles what wine is to a tired horse, and he is for the moment grateful for the gift. If I can work upon that gratitude, if I can better that inclination, if I can stiffen his weak spirit to stand for me and against my enemies, why the devil is in it if I cannot manage to humble my dukes. After all, a treaty is only so much spoiled parchment, if circumstances tend to make it meaningless. I am very sure you understand me, friend François."

Looking into the King's crafty eyes, Villon felt that he understood him very well. The promise of Conflans would never bind that shifty, relentless spirit, armoured as it was with patience. He knew that King Louis would wait, through the seasons and through the years, silently spinning his snares, tirelessly waiting for any opportunity to

harass, to isolate, to undermine his adversaries. What was the grey, humiliating present to one whose fancy planned a golden, triumphant future, and whose heart was sustained by confidence in his power to realize his dream.

"I think I shall win in the end," Louis resumed, "and I think you think so, too, good gossip. No doubt you remember the fable of the faggot of sticks that was unbreakable till the farmer undid the withies and snapped each individual branch across his knee. This League of the Public Weal, as the fools style their fellowship of fraud, is bound together for the hour by the strong bonds of a common interest. But by and by, sooner or later, the common cords will loosen, will fall away. And then, by God's Easter, I'll break each man of the gang across my knee, each in turn. Not one of them shall be left, not one, to boast that he held Louis of France, and France herself, in bondage."

As Louis uttered this menace he rose to his feet, uplifted by an excitement unusual for him to feel, and rare, indeed, for him to exhibit, and paced the hall with animation, striking his right hand against the palm of his left as if he were bruising the faces of his enemies. Villon, observing him, was well content in his heart to think that he was not one of those mutinous dukes, so confident did he feel that the King would win in the end and would be pitiless with the losers. Nay, more, he congratulated himself that he was not Charles of the blood royal, while he reflected that brotherly love would be little likely to hold the King's hand if he could strike surely at the rebellious kinsman

whose dignity made him the hope and whose weakness made him the tool of the leaguers.

After a few moments of movement the King, whose very vehemence, unfamiliar as it was, had been assumed for the purpose of emphasizing for his hearer his belief in himself, returned to his seat and to his discourse.

"Belief in oneself, in one's star, is a great quality," he said in his usual quiet voice. "If you believe in yourself others will believe in you. I will tell you something that happened to me once, when I was a little boy."

The King for a moment closed his eyes as he spoke as if to review some picture of the past, and Villon, waiting, was amused to find how much those last words used by Louis had surprised him. It was so hard even for a quick imagination to think of Louis as a little boy, to think of him as ever other than the lean, stooped, prematurely withered schemer, with his shabby garments and his little leaden saints. Had those thin legs once been plump and chubby, had those claws that clutched at power once been the podgy, dimpled fingers of a babe, had those grey cheeks once worn the colour, those awful eyes once shown the candour of youth. Villon, declining to believe it, diverted himself with a whimsical image of a pigmy Louis in all points like his present self, dusty raiment, stork legs, leaden saints and all, hunched in the compass of a cradle, an astonishing portent. The fancy compelled him to a smile which he was fortunate enough to banish before the King lifted his lids again and fixed his gaze on François.

"It is a long while ago," said Louis, "but I remember it as if it were yesterday. I was seated in a window seat at Chinon, reading in a Book of Hours, and thinking—well, you know the sort of thoughts children think."

Villon again found his imagination too feeble to present to his intelligence any idea of the thoughts a child Louis the Eleventh would think.

"I was all alone in a still hall with an open space at one end that was a kind of thoroughfare to the apartments where my father played the fool. The sound of coming footsteps diverted me from my book, and I lifted my eyes and beheld a little company of captains, most of whom I knew, Lahire being one, and the best known to me. In the midst of these warriors moved one whom, child though I was, I knew to be a woman, a girl rather, for all that she was habited like a man. She carried herself straightly; her body was stoutly built, the body of a peasant, but her face was the face of an angel. It was not a beautiful face, and yet better than any beautiful face I have ever seen, simple, strong, honest, and all about it, visible to me like the halo of a saint, the celestial flames of self-belief made an aureole. You know who it was that I saw, well enough."

Villon did, indeed, know well enough, had known since the first mention of the maid in man's apparel, and his eyes brimmed with tears, which, indeed, François had always ready for great names and great deeds.

"Joan, the good Lorrainer," he sighed. What would he not have given for a sight of that country-

side lass who saved France from the English and died a martyr to become a saint. The shrivelled King in the dingy raiment seemed to take on a new dignity because his childish eyes had stared at the maid of Orleans.

"I never saw her again," Louis said with something like a wail in his voice. "There should have been one like me for King of France, not my father, someone who felt the meaning of France here"—and Louis beat his right hand fiercely against his breast, over his heart—"someone who would have understood her divinity, her integrity, and served her, heart and soul. There were many such, but she needed a king's aid, and my father was then no king. Ah, Master François, Master François, you may think it is a far cry from Joan to Louis, but I tell you that I have the love and pity for the realm of France that she had, and that the work she did I will do, I, in my way and with my means, as she did it in her way and with her means, till I have made this France a real kingdom, united, solid, foursquare to Heaven, no longer the battle-ground of brawling vassals."

In Villon's eyes the meagre, mean figure of the King seemed suddenly transfigured. Bent and haggard as he was, he seemed to stiffen and to glow as he spoke, and to bear himself with the dignity of a deliverer. Whatever else he was, whatever else he yet would be, he was a lover of France, and for that François loved him, François, who had not dreamed that the King's grotesque body could prove a casket that held such hope. As for Louis, he sat musing for a little while as if fatigued by his

sudden show of energy, and then again broke silence.

“ I have much work to do and it needs many years for the doing. But I believe I have been sent into the world for this purpose, to create a new France, and I believe that Heaven will grant me life till I have finished my task.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE KING'S LIEUTENANT.

THE King sank back upon his seat as if exhausted by the violence of his emotions, and through lowered lids observed with satisfaction the enthusiasm painted upon Villon's face. He coughed feebly as if to accentuate the contrast between his indomitable resolve and his attenuated body ; then, as if rousing himself with an effort from a threatened lethargy, he sat upright again and smiled confidentially at Villon.

"I am strangely garrulous to-day," he confessed ; "I must be growing old, friend Villon, to play the chattering jackdaw thus. But in your company somehow I seem to surrender myself to the atmosphere of ardour, of poetry, of audacity. I grow young, friend, I grow young, and I babble of my dreams. Well, well ; let us set my dreams of one side for a moment and talk of your realities. Tell me, friend Villon, how do you like Poitou ? "

"Better, sire," Villon answered, with a laugh, "than Poitou seems to like me."

The King nodded his head and looked very wise.

"I think I heard some rumour to that purpose," Louis said. "Perhaps a starling chattered it from a hedge. Perhaps a bishop babbled. Come, now, what is the trouble between you and the good people of Poitou?"

"Why, sire," François replied, "the gentry of Poitou seem to hold the opinion that because I am not of noble birth I had no right to marry a noble damsel, nor to breathe their Poitevin air."

The King put on a great air of indignation and banged his lean thighs with his fists.

"Now, by God's Easter," he cried fiercely, "these Poitevin lordlings shall learn that the King is the fountain of honour, and that he can ennoble a goat if it pleases his fancy to do so. What do I care for a man's birth? It is the man I look for. Why, some of my most trusted advisers have not an ounce of good blood in them: Tristan, for instance, and Olivier, and you know what fine fellows they are."

Now Villon had no such high admiration for Tristan and Olivier as the King professed, and it did not at all rejoice him to have his name coupled with theirs in the King's argument. But he was careful to show no sign of mortification on his face, though he knew that the King could make a shrewd guess at his thoughts. He answered as cheerfully as he could:

"Your Majesty's subjects of Poitou are not of your Majesty's mind in this matter."

"Then they must be persuaded to amend their judgments and their manners," Louis retorted, with

a frown. "But I think I further heard of some little bickerings between you and them in this business."

"There have been," Villon admitted modestly, "some trivial altercations, too insignificant for your Majesty's consideration."

Louis shook his head.

"Nothing that can happen in the realm of France is too insignificant for my heed," he said gravely. "But I shall not tax you for narrative, for I think I have the gist of the matter. I do not know which jest is the more risible, my lord of Grigny a-swinging, the proud Poitevins rubbing shoulders with beggars, or a certain rascal from Paris that is known to both of us masquerading in the habit of a Franciscan and preaching sedition as cheerfully as you please."

Here Villon judged it imperative to protest.

"Forgive me, sire ; not sedition."

Louis rubbed his fingers together and grinned.

"I have heard it said," he went on, "in a wise phrase hailing from the East, that in sleep the king and the beggar are equal. You, as it seems, hold that they are also equal when they are awake. In this I, because I happen to be a king, differ from you."

"Your Majesty——" Villon began in a somewhat embarrassed manner, but the King motioned him to be silent.

"Never explain," he said cheerfully. "Many a bad explanation spoils a good case. Be content to have said certain words to which, for reasons of my own, I choose to take no objection. They may

chance to serve me. They may chance not to serve me. We shall see."

The King's folded hands slipped down over his crossed knees. The King's chin drooped on the King's breast. "I am tired," he said, with a yawn, and then unyoked his fingers and spread his palms to the blaze.

"Will your Majesty taste wine?" Villon suggested. Louis nodded his head.

"I was not thinking of my bodily condition just then, gossip. I was thinking of the realm of France, and reflecting that after all it might prove not unpleasant to be a beggar instead of a king. But since you hint at wine, why, wine let it be. There should be some good drinking in the cellars of Vaucelles."

"There is some good drinking, I can assure your Majesty," Villon said, as he rose and summoned a servant to bring fresh wine and clean vessels. "The Fircone was well enough in its way, but since I have been a gentleman my palate seems blurred for all but the best."

Louis laughed, and when the wine came he took a full cup from the hands of his host and sat sipping it thoughtfully, with much the same air of wise satisfaction that a bird wears when it sips water from a shallow pan.

"I am thinking," the King began, after a prolonged silence, which Villon had deemed it prudent not to break, "that it might be well to strengthen a little your position in Poitou. To be frank with you, I am none too confident of the loyalty of Poitou, and I begin to think that it needs a strong

hand. Can you grip hard, can you hit hard, gossip ? ”

Villon, wondering what the King meant, nodded his head. “ I can do anything in your Majesty’s service,” he protested. Louis nodded, too.

“ You did me good service once in Paris,” he muttered as if he were talking to himself ; “ but that may have been no more than a spurt such as any capable fellow might make that was given a few days for uncertain glory with a certain gallows waiting at the end. But you are safe now, you are comfortable ; you are happily married. I begin to be afraid that you are woefully domesticated. No more touch-and-go, devil-may-care, splendid head-long enterprises for you, I fear me.”

Villon smiled before he answered ; also Villon sighed ; and Louis quietly noticed both shows of emotion.

“ If your Majesty has any commands for me,” he said earnestly, “ I am as ready for them now as I was, as I shall ever be.”

The King patted his knee approvingly.

“ There is the cry I like,” he affirmed. “ Harken, gossip ; I once pinned my faith to you for the sake of a dream. Suppose I pin my faith to you now for the sake of your true service.”

Villon wondered whither the King’s persistence was drifting. He answered as before.

“ If your Majesty has any commands for me I will do my best to obey them.”

“ Friend and gossip,” responded Louis, “ these be troublesome times, and the loyalty of Poitou is something doubtful. This fellow of Grigny, for

instance, whom you set dangling, makes me mightily suspicious. Poitou wants looking after. If a king could be in every part of his dominions at one and the same time, I should be in Poitou as well as in Paris, and the Poitevins would find that they were well shepherded. I remember once hearing an Eastern tale of some sultan who had the power of multiplying his personality. A power so pernicious in a paynim's hands has unfortunately been denied to a Christian king, who would find it very useful. Well, well."

As Louis appeared to be absorbed in his reflections on the unfortunate limitations of kingship, Villon solaced himself with a draught of wine, and found, rather to his regret than to his surprise, that his idle thoughts drifted insensibly from the King and the King's business to Katherine and her anger, and the challenge that lay between them. He sighed heavily, and the sound seemed to rouse Louis from his brown study.

"Where was I?" he asked sharply. "Where was I, gossip?"

"Your Majesty," replied François, trying to unhorse care, "was regretting that Heaven in its wisdom had not enriched France with some dozen or more identical Louis the Eleventh at the same time."

Louis chuckled.

"It is a pity," he admitted, "but we must do the best we can to amend destiny. Happily that can be done in this instance, for you, friend Villon, shall be your King's lieutenant in Poitou."

Villon was somewhat staggered by this result of

the monarch's cogitations. "I, sire?" he gasped. Louis nodded affably.

"Even you, gossip. You shall be my representative, my deputy, my other self. What you say shall be spoken with the King's voice; what you do shall be done with the King's hand. Poitou is yours to do as you please withal. By God's Easter, if the squeamish Poitevins gag at the count of Montcorbier, they shall have to stomach the count of Poitou or it will be the worse for them."

"Count of Poitou," Villon repeated, hardly believing, suspecting some queer trick. "Count of Poitou. That is a title, sire, which seems only wearable by a great lord."

"And you are a great lord," retorted Louis, "or shall be when I have done with you. Heavens, man, are you afraid of the Poitevins?"

"Sire," said Villon emphatically, "saving the fear that is common to all men, seeing their peril and jeopardy, there is only one person living of whom I am afraid."

"And that person?" Louis questioned slily. Villon made him a reverence.

"Your gracious Majesty, of course," he declared. Louis cackled.

"You are becoming a courtier, my lord of Poitou. No need for compliments between King and vice-King. By God's Easter, I thought you meant your wife."

Which was precisely what Villon did mean, and Louis knew it well enough, and Villon knew that he knew it.

"Then if it is understood," said Louis cheerfully,

"that you are not afraid of the Poitevins, there is little more to be said, and you can begin your new business to-morrow."

He reached for his tankard, took a long sip of wine, "To your health, King's lieutenant," and then rose to his feet, as one that must needs be jogging.

"Will not your Majesty sup and sleep here to-night?" François entreated.

Louis shook his head.

"I lie at Little House to-night," he said. "The old lord is my old friend. You and he are neighbours. Are you friends, belike?" Louis peered at Villon curiously as he spoke.

"I dare not call myself more than an acquaintance," Villon said, with some embarrassment, and then added hardily: "He has a very comely daughter."

Louis' set, pale face suddenly took on life and colour.

"You should have seen her mother," he cried, "if you wished to talk of beauty. It is a pity fair women cannot be immortal, or, at least, that they cannot live as long as we want, and be always young while they are about our business."

"I think," suggested Villon, "that if your Majesty were King of Heaven instead of King of France, you would make the game of life a pleasanter enterprise."

"For the winners, gossip," the King commented, "for the winners. However, we must make the best of it with such pawns and pieces, such knaves and queens, as we have. And so

good-night, gossip, and God's blessing on your rest."

"Shall I attend your Majesty?" Villon asked.

Louis waved away the proposal.

"No need, friend and fellow-ruler. Olivier attends me outside, with my escort. 'Tis a fine night, if a trifle windy, and but a brief ride to Little House. Wait on me there to-morrow morning at the ninth hour. No, do not bring me to the door. I like to come and go as I please."

And in another instant the King had whisked out of the door and disappeared, leaving behind him a vague eerie impression in Villon's mind that the visit had been no more than a vision of a dream. But the King's tankard still stood upon the table where he had placed it after his last draught, when he had pledged his host as his lieutenant in Poitou. Lieutenant of Poitou: it sounded sonorously, titillating vanity, tickling ambition the ever adventurous with possibilities of power. What was the King's purpose in jamming this wreath upon his forehead? Who should say; and after all, what did it matter, what did anything matter, now? At least Louis played a King's game for a King's stakes, and if Master François could help him, Master François' life was very much at his service.

With these thoughts in his mind he made his way to the chamber where his five friends had been lodged, and found them daffing the time aside very pleasantly with wine, victuals and intellectual pastimes. René de Montigny was playing softly to himself on a little lute that he carried at his girdle, and singing quaint little country-side ditties thereto

with an air of lamb-like innocence. Colin de Cayeulx and Casin Cholet were throwing the dice, and Guy Tabarie and Jehan le Loup, who had started a game of cards, had drifted into a philosophical disputation as to which were the noblest of the painted emblems.

The intrusion of Villon dissipated these simple recreations. Over the fire the six friends set to talking of old times, old playmates, old frauds, cheats, dodges, and merry devices, till the night was grey. When Villon quitted his guests he was still sober enough to remember what he would gladly have forgotten, and to make his way to his bedchamber without unreasonable noise or divagation. And there in silence he stretched himself by the side of his wife and they lived through the night as if a naked sword had lain between them. And the name of that sword was called enmity, and the name of that sword was called jealousy, and the name of that sword was called evil temper, and also false pride. And they were doomed to sleep so, with that sword between them, through many a long night.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE KING'S MEN.

WHEN Villon had quitted his guests there was for a while a spell of silence upon the five men, each man groping in the puzzle of his vinous thoughts. René de Montigny had taken up his little lute again, and bent over it, picking at its strings and crooning to himself a little tender pastoral, honey-sweet and thyme-scented, a little song of lanes and green spaces and quiet streams. But presently he lifted his head and looked around at his companions.

"I am thinking," he said—and, indeed, he looked very thoughtful—"that it is one thing to marry a great lady, and another thing to be a merry man."

"François seemed merry enough," observed Guy Tabarie, who was not a profound observer, and had more than once been cheated by false coins, to the great scorn of his companions.

"I do not think his good lady was over glad to see us," Jehan le Loup commented, with a new snarl in his jackal's voice. Here again Tabarie took the matter up.

"There be few housewives that would welcome

five roaring blades that took her unawares as we did. Besides, it is well known that your married woman is seldom or never fond of her husband's 'fore-marriage friends."

Colin de Cayeux and Casin Cholet said nothing, but waggled their heads and looked wise. They had been drinking more than their fellows, and seemed and felt philosophers. Montigny busied himself with his lute again, and then spoke, talking through the plaintive tune that he made.

"You say François seemed merry"—this was in answer to Tabarie—"because you are still something of a gull, albeit you have flown for years with the finest night-hawks in Paris. But I tell you, I that have the wit to see behind a grin and hear behind a guffaw, that our François is not the man he was. He is hipped, nipped, whipped, clipped, pipped, stripped; he has tripped and slipped, I tell you."

René paused because he could think of no more words of a like jingle that would at all apply to the changed condition of his friend. The words that he had found impressed his hearers gloomily.

"Is it as bad as that?" gasped Tabarie, and because he felt inclined to blubber he took in a draught of wine to compensate him for any moisture that nature might exact, taking toll of tears.

"I always thought her a proud piece," Jehan le Loup affirmed, "and one that held her nose high, as if honest men like us smelt bad."

Colin de Cayeux and Casin Cholet shook their heads more solemnly than ever, and finding nothing to say plied themselves with wine.

"It is as bad as that," Montigny declared, ceasing to tweak his lute. "Our old friend has made a mistake and a bad mistake. He was easily cock of our walk. Damn him, he could rhyme, and I never could, and damn him, he could devise whimsical expedients for filling our bellies. But he has had a feather or two taken out of his tail since he got among the grandees, or I am very much mistaken."

Casin Cholet hiccupped something to the effect that it was a great mistake to marry above one, and Colin de Cayeulx murmured cynically that women, by and large, were a nuisance, generally, particularly and everyway. Then the pair pulled at their pottles again and stared with fishy eyes and swinish smiles at the lutanist.

"Perhaps," said Montigny, suavely reflective, "the marital misfortunes of our poor friend may prove to our advantage. If he be henpecked, as I dare swear he is, he may lust, as most married men do, after the merriments of bachelorhood. Perhaps he will help us to pick Saint Radegonde's pocket."

"Not he," growled Jehan le Loup, "he is a gentleman now, with gold in poke and no fellowship with honest rogues. Better go further afield, say I."

"Well," said Guy Tabarie, pensively, his eyelids wet with tears and his slobber lips wet with wine, "if mad François be now sad François, as you say, it might be well to give him the go-by."

Montigny shook his head.

"Never shake off a friend because of his distress while his pockets are full," he urged. "François

has money ; we have not. François is intelligent ; he will see that such a condition of things is unjust and as a logical consequence of that knowledge some of his money will assuredly become ours."

"I have never found," Jehan le Loup objected, "that those who get on in the world are eager to aid those that do not."

"You are a cynic," Montigny retorted. "One way or another we will get money out of François, I feel sure."

Casin Cholet, who had kept silence awhile, here put in his oar.

"We might even help ourselves," he suggested. "There are many pretty trifles lying about which could easily be smuggled under a friar's gown."

Montigny shook his head reprovingly.

"That would not be gentlemanly conduct," he protested. "Also it would not be at all safe. If the trick were discovered François might resent it, talk about honour among thieves, and the proper behaviour of hawks towards hawks, and such like philosophy. We couldn't manage to smuggle away enough to make it worth while to risk offending him, for I have it in my mind that he may prove a Golden Goose."

"He is goose enough, in all conscience," snarled Colin de Cayeux. Guy Tabarie put in a protest.

"I call no man a goose who feathers his nest so well," he stuttered, by reason that he was somewhat drunk and was newly troubled by hiccoughs. Colin de Cayeux thought himself equal to the occasion and the necessary repartee.

"Call him a cuckoo, then," he suggested, but

the retort was not to the liking of Guy Tabarie, whose emotions heightened their pitch with his cups.

"You talk like a fool," he gurgled, "and one that knows nothing of natural history. What bird has honest François ousted from the nest. There was but one bird in the nest and there she bides still, warm under his roof and their beaks ever meeting."

Tears rolled down Tabarie's cheeks as he pictured so feelingly a connubial felicity denied to him. His matrimonial adventures had been many and varied, but up to now no one of them had been established on a sound commercial basis. So he sighed and drank and hiccupped, and hiccupped and drank and sighed, and wished that he had been inspired with the idea of writing verses to a fine lady, and, in consequence, been employed by her to kill an unwelcome lover.

Colin de Cayeux looked quarrelsome, but René de Montigny raised a hand and restrained rage.

"We are living in troublous times, brother," he said, "and it behoves honest rogues like us to walk as warily as brown burgess or bright knight. Here is King Louis with heavy odds against him, his back to the wall, as one might say, for all the world like a fellow fighting for a pasteboard crown with a wooden sword. But you see for yourselves that our Villon is a King's man, hilt and blade; you must have guessed as much from the way he spoke of the King to-night. Now François has little cause to love the King, for if the King did help him to a fine wife and a fine house, he had little

will to do so, but would liefer have helped him to a gibbet. But also our François is no fool, and if you find him backing King Louis, it is because he thinks King Louis is going to win, and that it is wise to stand by him. I should not have felt so confident myself, but I have a great respect for François' judgment, and perhaps a greater for his luck. If he puts his money on the King we may as well do likewise. I speak figuratively, of course," he hastened to add, seeing painted on the scowling faces around him the greatest possible reluctance to put any pennies of theirs on anything, "I speak figuratively, of course. But I think we had better be King's men for the present, like Villon, and hope for pickings."

"What pickings?" Jehan le Loup grunted. René was ready to explain.

"I chanced, before I left Paris, to hear from a friend of mine who holds an official position in the King's household—he is, in fact, an under-turnspit—that his Majesty proposed very shortly to visit Tours. Tours is next to Poitou; Poitou is in a disturbed condition; some of its lords are turbulent, some of its lords are easy going; few, I fancy, are actively for the King or for his enemies. Now, if when the King comes Poitou proves to be loyal, why here be we in an excellent position, with François for our friend, and a plenty of fat churches at easy pillage. But put case that Poitou prove not loyal, why then belike they will be fighting, and where there is fighting there is always looting, which is surely the only reason why a good man should follow the

wars. And it is better to fight on the side that François serves than against it, for François makes a good fighter when the mood is on him, and François will prove our bulwark and our stay, our protector and our friend, in any case of difficulty, for the sake of old times and old thefts."

"By Heavens!" hiccoughed Guy Tabarie, "you talk like Minerva's owl, which was the wisest fowl that ever clucked. Long live King Louis, and long live us, for we are King Louis' merry men, that shall keep him steady-seated on his throne."

The others applauded the utterance with a vinous enthusiasm. It tickled their risibilities to assert themselves as King's men; it pleased their cupidity to think that there must needs be profit in their loyalty. What René de Montigny counselled was generally the law in their little community since Villon was lifted out of their swim, and now that they had found Villon again they were ready enough to renew the old friendship on what promised to prove better terms. It was decided there and then that King Louis should have the inestimable advantage of their services, and this decision once arrived at the desire for sleep followed on its heels with astonishing swiftness. Every man of the five rolled to the bed that had been spread for him and composed himself for slumber. After a second Montigny lifted his head.

"I talked with a fellow by the roadside yesterday that told me of strange doings among the common folk of Poitou. It seems that someone has been playing the prophet in the neighbourhood, telling all poor folk that they are as good as

the rich and better, and it appears that some of the fellows take the words very seriously, and talk wildly behind their hands of a good time that is close at hand when the lowly shall be uplifted and the lofty cast down. I did not pay much heed to the chatter, but it just came into my mind again. I wonder if our François could have anything to do with the joke ? ”

But he questioned deaf ears, for his four friends were snoring. Wherefore Montigny drooped his head and incontinently snored too.

CHAPTER XX.

THE KING'S DAUGHTER.

BETIMES the next morning Villon made his way to Little House, and though he was matinal and over-punctual, he did not catch the King asleep. Louis was seated in the garden, dandling his daughter upon his knees, and kissing her exuberantly. When he caught sight of François, he nodded to him, very friendly, but in no wise interrupted his paternal dalliances, which seemed to gratify him exceedingly. When Villon entered the garden the girl held out her hand for him to kiss with a little queenly air that became her mightily, for all that it was no little exaggerated in the wearing.

Villon dutifully knelt and kissed the pretty hand extended to him, while Louis fondly embraced the other, and the girl grinned at her visitor with an impish look of amusement in her eyes which made Villon wonder if the King had been gossiping, and feel angered at the thought. He ached to think that others should whisper about Katherine and him, and smile and amplify scandal. Truly, he

thought, he had lost the seasoned toughness of fibre that had made him invulnerable in the old Fircone; yet even as he thought thus he gave himself the lie promptly, remembering himself ever as a sentimentalist and a tenderskin, for all his jolly airs and lewd graces.

Louis slid the girl off his lap and patted her cheeks appreciatively, as one that knew a good thing in womanhood when he saw it.

"A bonny girl," he said admiringly; "but you should have seen her mother," he added, by way of a rider to his verdict, and in this opinion the lord of Little House, that just then emerged from his dwelling, cordially concurred. The girl did not seem to mind in the least the suggested depreciation.

"I am handsome enough to serve the best man's turn," she protested cheerfully. "I should be a king's sweetheart by rights." She turned to Louis and clapped a hand upon his shabby sleeve. "Why have you not got a king for me, sire?" she questioned, drolling him with her eyes.

Louis shrugged his shoulders.

"All kings have not my good taste," he said sententiously; "and, indeed, I want no more kings in France than myself, though there be some good folk that carry themselves like kings for a season. Wait till you see brother Charles, lass; perhaps you will think him more king-like than your poor old Louis."

While the girl laughed and nestled against him by way of answer, seeming to delight in assertion of her kinship, Louis turned to François.

"Will you keep this wild girl company for a while," he said, "while I chat of some matter with my host?"

And on the word he left the pair together, and drawing the lord of Little House by the arm, conducted him to a distant walk whose trees were trellised to make a shady pergola. Here the pair paced up and down together, deep in converse, if such a term could be applied to an association in which one member spoke almost all the time while the other did very little more than listen attentively. Villon watched them as they went, the silver-haired philosopher erect and silent, the stooped, haggard sovereign voluble and vehement, and marvelled to find the ancient seem the younger man.

"Have you nothing better to gaze at in this garden than a pair of elders talking folly?" Loysette asked him mockingly.

François turned his head instantly and fixed his eyes upon her. She was looking very lovely that morning. The coming of the King seemed to have animated her whole nature; her usual easy-going, self-contented tranquillity was all afire with excitement. Her warm cheeks glowed like summer roses; her blue eyes shone like winter stars. Every line of her lithe ripe figure seemed alive with animal vitality; her glances allured, commanded, menaced enchantment. Villon imaged her as a new Circe, and feared to find himself turning into a hog.

"Well," said Loysette again, after a few seconds of silence, "are you tongue-tied this morning? Can you do nothing but stare?"

"I was thinking about you, I promise you," François answered slowly. "I was thinking how like you were to Circe."

"Who was Circe?" the girl questioned quickly. "If she was not someone very wonderful I shall not pardon you for pairing us."

"Circe was very wonderful indeed," Villon made answer in a bantering manner, which he assumed, almost involuntarily, as a shield against he knew not what; "almost as wonderful as you. She was a lady who lived long ago in old Greece. She was so beautiful that all men who beheld her must needs love her beauty, and then, because she was a subtle enchantress, she plagued her worshippers by turning them into swine."

"That was silly of her," Loysette pronounced decisively. "Men are piggish enough as it is, without any wizardry. And besides, it is pleasant to be worshipped, and does no harm."

"Not to the idol, perhaps," said Villon thoughtfully, "but possibly to the idolaters."

"Do you worship me?" said the girl teasingly. She came nearer to him as she spoke, so near that he could feel her breath upon his face as she laughed.

"I hope I worship all lovely things," he answered, trying to keep his voice at jesting pitch. "To do so were, truly, part of my trade, if indeed I be a poet."

Loysette put her face close to his; so close that with the least movement their lips would have met.

"I have taken a fancy to you, Master Poet," she whispered. "Have you taken a fancy to me?"

It was very tempting to have those lips so close to him, those lips that he had already kissed ; it was very tempting to watch her bright eyes wooing him so audaciously ; it was very tempting to hear such frank love-words murmured. Why should he let this flower of the spring go by him ? Why should he not snatch at it like the ungodly of Solomon's wisdom ? Yet the face of Katherine came of a sudden between him and the face of Loysette and blotted out Loysette's face.

"I should have taken a great fancy to you," he answered daffingly, "if I had been a free man when we met."

Loysette made a whimsical face at him, half pity and half reproach, as she said petulantly :

"What has your freedom to do with your fancy ? Good Lord, must every man that is ill-mated sit mumchance for that, and let the world go by. Better a sweet leman than a sour wife. I tell you again, Master Poet, that I have taken a fancy to you, and I care not a jot whether you be married or single."

Villon found himself quite at a loss. His flesh wanted to clasp and kiss the bewitching minx ; his spirit shrieked to him to stand by his honour.

"Your father——" he stammered. He felt that it was a feeble pretext, but, indeed, wits and words failed him. The girl made a grimace.

"If you mean the lord of Little House," she said very contemptuously, "you should know enough of his wisdom, his philosophy, by this time."

"The King——" Villon suggested tremulously,

beginning to feel a little ridiculous in thus trying to fub off a handsome young woman who had avowed a predilection for him. Loysette laughed scornfully.

"The King knows my whim," she said. "I have no secrets from the King; why should I? 'If the man be your fancy,' he said to me, 'take him in Heaven's name. It is as he please and as you please, with the pair of you.' Well, I do please, Master Poet, for you please me. Do I please you?"

She showed very beautiful as she stood there before him, flinging her youth and her love so shamelessly at his feet. It was not the girl's shamelessness that stayed him; it was a queer, unfamiliar conscience that was not to be quenched.

"My dear," he said very gently, and with an odd quaver in his voice, for it went not readily with a man of his disposition to put a fair woman by, "my dear, you may think me an idiot, if you please, but I must be true to my wife."

She looked at him puzzled, with knitted eyebrows.

"Surely," she said, wondering, "you do not pretend that you are happy with your wife?"

"I pretend nothing," said Villon simply. "I only know that there seemed to come a change in my nature when I first saw a certain lady, wherefore I gave her all that there was of me to give, body and soul, and a gift so given is not to be taken back. But believe that I shall always love you, in another kind, for your good thoughts of me."

Loysette crossed her arms on her bosom, perhaps

to keep it still, and looked into his troubled face with a smile.

"Say no more," she said brightly. "A man must buckle his belt tight or loose as he pleases. But I think I am ripe fruit in the orchard of life, and I was blithely ready to fall into your hand."

"There should be a better man to win you and wear you," François said sadly. He kept asking himself desperately if he were indeed changed for the better since the merry Fircone days. He thought of Katherine's angry spirit and mad jealousy, and turned his head aside to avoid the sight of Loysette's eyes. For indeed he was sorely tempted of fate, and had never been of metal to defy temptation. Loysette gave a little sigh.

"I wonder how he will be," she said, with a gravity that sat pathetically upon her buoyancy. "Perhaps he will marry me, though that, as I think, is scarcely likely, weighing all things. I think he will be a fortunate man if I love him, and that at least is likely, for I would not mate where I hate. For I think as well of myself as ever, though I be not for your market."

"Indeed," said Villon sadly, "you should not say that, or you should not say it in that way."

The girl winced a little at the implied reproach in his words, and then she laughed gaily.

"Nay," she protested, "I bear you no ill-will, because you choose to play the faithful lover. I wonder if my man, whoever he may be, will prove so fine of spirit when I play the vixen."

She spread out her hands in a careless gesture, as if she cast the subject of their speech away from her

lightly enough. She had moved a little ways from him by now, and stood watching him with some amusement and some gravity.

"So you are lord of Poitou now," she said, "and set to keep the good Poitevins in order. I think you will find the Lord Gontier of Grigny a rough bear to tame."

François' thoughts had been far enough away from affairs of policy and order, but he welcomed the change of theme and was grateful to her readiness.

"Yet he can be tamed," he answered lightly, "if it takes a ring through his nose to do it. I have not rubbed shoulders with bear-leaders in the Court of Miracles for nothing."

Loysette went on as if she had not heard him.

"Folk say that bears are fond of honey, and folk say—and I hope you say so with them—that I am honey-sweet. Now the lord of Grigny finds me so sweet that he would like to gobble me up, but I have no mind to be so gobbled. And because he finds me sweet is just another reason why he finds you passing sour."

François looked the interrogation that he did not speak, and Loysette understood and answered his silence.

"If you think he has heard nothing of your visits to Little House, why then your town-bred wits are not sharp enough for the country-side, where every bit of news blows about like thistle-down. Why the last time he rode by here, and that was no longer ago than yesterday, he made to rate me for the sake of your visits."

Villon felt that his dislike of the lord of Grigny was increasing unreasonably. Loysette was nothing to him ; Loysette could be nothing to him, and yet the thought of her as desired by the lord of Grigny angered him, none the less because he knew that his anger was all unreasonable.

"And what did you say when Messire de Grigny scolded you ?" he asked, with an ill-worn air of nonchalance.

"Why," said Loysette, half smiling and half sighing and wholly blushing, "I fear me that I gave him to understand very plainly that you would be always welcome where he would be never welcome, and I fear, also, that I may have led him to credit that you cared more to visit me than, as it turns out, you really do."

She looked so prettily penitent as she said this, with her hands devoutly folded and her lids demurely lowered, that Villon found it hard to remember that he was no longer a rascal bachelor of Paris with a glib tongue that was free to say its will to a pretty girl. But he did remember and he held his peace.

"So you see," Loysette went on, after some seconds of silence, "my lord of Grigny takes you for his rival here, which is indeed no compliment to you, for I would rather mate with a clown of the fields than with my Lord Gontier of Grigny. But I tell you all this that you may be on your guard."

"You are my good friend, Loysette," François answered earnestly, "and I am very grateful for your thought of me. But if I am the King's

lieutenant in Poitou, my lord Bear of Grigny will do well to keep in his den."

He spoke a little vaingloriously, for he was irksomely conscious that with the best will in the world the part he had been allotted to play on that morning's stage had not been altogether the showy, noble, glorious, heroic part he loved to play. The man who, for whatever excellent reasons, repulses a comely woman's wooing, may applaud his discretion, but secretly fears that he is ridiculous. Loysette laughed lightly, with bright eyes unveiled now and steadfastly set upon him. Villon felt uneasily certain that she read his thoughts.

"I hope all will be as you wish and as you will," she said. "For my own part, if I could be afraid of anything I could be afraid of the Lord Gontier of Grigny, for he is very patient in his hates and will wait an age to slake them. But, of course, you must know best, you that are made the King's lieutenant in Poitou."

Villon was fretfully convinced that however tenderly Loysette might incline towards him, she would never allow her senses to silence her wits, and that she saw quite clearly through his masquerades and his fanfaronades, even when she did not understand the native truth that prompted to the mask and the swagger.

"I think you are laughing at me, little Loysette," he protested merrily; "but if I had been afraid of Bull-face before—which I do not think I was—I should not fear him now, for you have given my spirits such a fillip that I would tweak Agamemnon by the nose if he came here to beard me."

"If you call the lord of Grigny Agamemnon," said Loysette, "he is not like to beard you at present, for I think you would not find him to-day within the four corners of Poitou if you were to hunt for him."

"Indeed!" said Villon; "where may the good Gontier have gone to?"

"That I cannot tell you," Loysette said thoughtfully; "but he got wind that the King would come to Tours, and it may be he had his own reasons for taking his leave without waiting on his Majesty. Maybe he has gone to Prince Charles; maybe he has gone to the Duke of Burgundy; maybe he has gone to the Duke of Brittany, peddling his services. I cannot say, and I cannot guess, and by God's Easter"—Villon laughed to hear her mouth so prettily the parental oath—"I do not care a jot; but, anyhow, he is out of your way for the present."

"Well," said Villon, with a laugh, "if he and I were to fight for your favour, Loysette, I should do my best to be the better man."

"Why, I am glad to hear you say as much," the girl declared warmly. Then she added in a lower tone, with a queer little laugh at the back of her words: "Here come my fathers. Be pleased to seem merry, and believe that I wish you well."

Even as she spoke Louis and the lord of Little House had quitted the pergola and were bending their steps in the direction of Villon and Loysette. Villon obeyed Loysette's wishes as faithfully as he could, and aped all hilarity as they approached. As for the girl, she seemed bubbling with mirth, and swayed lightly where she stood like a poppy in

the wind. As the two men came close Louis shot a sharp interrogative glance at Loysette, to which the girl replied with a tiny shrug of the shoulders and a faint grimace.

"I have changed my mind," she said lightly in the King's ear as she turned aside, and at her words a frown added for a moment, but only for a moment, a furrow to the care-ploughed field of the King's forehead. Then he turned, all equanimity and cheer, to Villon.

"Well, my lieutenant," he said briskly, "I have been chatting with my gossip here. From what he tells me of Poitou and the Poitevins I think you may find your hands full and hard to empty. But it may please you to hear that he advises me to come to terms with brother Charles."

"Sire," said Villon, "that is a very good suggestion of my lord of Little House."

The King rubbed his hands.

"So good a suggestion," he said cheerfully, "that I even made bold unaided to anticipate it, and to send a message to brother Charles, entreating him to a brotherly conference. Now he is at Bordeaux and I am at Tours, so where could there be a pleasanter place of meeting than your good Castle of Vaucelles," and he clapped Villon amiably on the shoulder as he spoke.

"Your Majesty does me much honour," Villon answered.

"Not at all," the King protested, "not at all. You are my lieutenant in Poitou and Poitou's richest noble—by marriage," the King added pensively, as if an afterthought.

Villon winced, which was what the King wished.

"Now it shall be your business, gossip, to ride with a suitable escort to meet my brother at Fontenay, and bring him back in all honour and triumph to Vaucelles. And now be off with you, and make merry with your wife till to-morrow."

Villon kissed the King's hand and kissed Loysette's hand, and quitted Little House with his mind full of troubling thoughts.

Midway between Little House and Vaucelles-les-Tours Villon came upon a group of five friars that were squatted by the roadside. Though he guessed at once their identity, any doubts that he might have entertained were instantly dispelled. For as soon as the five frocks caught sight of him, they rose to their feet, and with much uplifting of their gaberdines began to execute an astonishing dance in the middle of the highway.

And what a dance it was! Every man capered for himself according to his own fancy, yet the movements of all were in a measure governed and guided by the tinkling of a little lute that one of the dancing mendicants carried. There was one that fandangoed like a Spaniard, and one that pranced in the way Italianate, and one that gambolled somewhat ungainly in the German fashion, and one that stamped and shuffled as if he were newly from Muscovy, and one that did little more than revolve upon his own axis with his arms extended like a jiggling dervish of the East.

But they all kept, or tried to keep, a kind of time with the melody in a minor key which he that carried the lute played for his playmates. An

amazing sight they were, those five mendicant friars, so tripping it and skipping it on that dusty Poitevin road, so amazing that Villon for all his causes for anxiety and for gloom was fain to clap his hands to his sides and crow.

René de Montigny made an end of his music, and he and his companions ceased dancing.

"Hail, brother," said René; "we came abroad in the hope of meeting you, for we must be going about our business, and would not depart without bidding you farewell."

"And what may that business be?" asked François, who naturally enough had but a confused memory of his yesterday's conversation with the rogues.

"Why," said Montigny, "it is in our mind, as we told you, to visit the shrine of Saint Radegonde, and to lighten its guardians of some of their cares and responsibilities in the way of plate and jewels."

"Friends," said Villon, shaking his head, "I cannot be privy to the plundering of a shrine."

Montigny glanced at his companions and then proceeded to give voice to the sour expressions of their countenances.

"Good brother," he said suavely, "we can very well understand that you have become a reformed character, for you eat well, and drink sweet, and sleep soft. Further, you have castle and lands and fat money-bags, all excellent and delectable aids to virtue and good citizenship. But we who have none of these fine things cannot afford to be so punctilious as you. Suffer us, therefore, to go our own road and ply our own trade in our own

way, for I take it that you do not push your new principles so far as to interfere with old friends."

"Lads," answered Villon, "if to-day were yesterday I should feel that it little became me to play the precisian or to meddle in your affairs, and for the sake of our old compact of rascality I should seek to free my memory of any confidences you might be pleased to make, knowing that such confidences were made on the faith of former friendship. But unfortunately to-day is not yesterday."

The faces of Villon's hearers, which had lightened a little with the earlier part of his discourse, now clouded again at its close. Jehan le Loup fumbled for his knife and whispered into the ears of Colin de Cayeulx that they were five to one, and that Villon wore a handsome ring on his finger. Guy Tabarie looked sulky, and Casin Cholet looked savage. None of these symptoms of impatience were unnoticed by Villon, but he had no doubt that he should get the better of his old comrades either in words or deeds. Montigny spoke again, still amiably ironical :

"What has happened since yesterday, old friend," he questioned, "to tickle your scrupulosities, irritate your respectabilities, and quicken your conscientiousness?"

"Simply this," Villon answered quietly, curbing a lusty impulse to give Montigny a cuffing, "that yesterday I was no more than an idle country gentleman, whereas to-day I am the King's lieutenant in Poitou, and therefore responsible to his Majesty for the law, order, and honour of the province."

The five knaves gaped in great amazement at this statement of Villon's.

"Forgive me, friend," said Montigny, "if I seem sceptical in asking how this new dignity came to you."

"It came from the lips of the King himself, who is at this moment here in Poitou," Villon answered. "So you see, comrades, that I have no course open to me save to request, entreat and urge you to abstain from picking and stealing in this neighbourhood, for if you were brought before me as pilferers I must needs prove a just judge, however much it might irk me to harass old acquaintances."

The five fellows looked furtively at each other. They evidently did not relish the new order and yet did not know how to resent it. Said René pathetically :

"If you take away our bread, friend Villon, have you any cake to give us in exchange ? "

"That is as it may be," Villon answered. "Will you serve me and serve the King as you did before ? What do you say to that, lads ? You made good subjects in Paris yonder. Why not make good subjects here in Poitou, where, as I take it, good subjects may be needed by and by ? "

Montigny rubbed his chin reflectively. So did his companions. The vagabond instinct was strong in all five and their fingers itched for plunder. But it seemed politic to stand well with Villon, now that Villon was a great lord. Moreover, Villon had proved a good captain in the Burgundian scuffles, and, which they valued more, a good paymaster. So they exchanged glances

and nods, and again Montigny made himself their mouthpiece.

"Brother," he said, "you speak us fair, and we make no doubt that you will treat us fair."

"You shall have each an ancient's pay," Villon promised ; "you shall be well clad, well weaponed, well horsed ; you shall eat and drink your fill. But you must serve me faithfully, for in serving me ye serve the King, to whom I owe allegiance. Is it a bargain ?"

It was a bargain, upon which all clasped hands, and the King's authority in Poitou had gained five whimsical supporters.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE KING'S BROTHER.

IN front of the Town Hall of Poitiers, on the sunlit noon of the succeeding day, a little ceremonial of great importance took place. The streets were occupied by the royal troops ; the populace stared from pavement and window, and King Louis, with François on one side of him and Olivier le Daim on the other, surveyed the scene with a lively interest. After a solemn flourish of trumpets a herald as solemnly proclaimed that it was the King's will and pleasure, in view of the many troubles then vexing the land of France, and, in no small degree, the good province of Poitou, that François, count of Montcorbier and lord of Vaucelles, should be known for the time being as the King's lieutenant in Poitou.

Then there came another flourish of trumpets, immediately followed by a lavish scattering of largesse amongst the crowd in the form of gold and silver pieces which Louis had prudently borrowed from the treasury of Vaucelles for the purpose. This act of generosity put the populace, who did not care in the least by what name their ruler might be known, in great good humour, and

they cheered the King's message vociferously. They further cheered when the King himself, amiably addressing them from a window as "my children," told them that he had arranged for a meeting with his brother Charles in their province in the fond and confident hope of bringing about a situation of complete amity and understanding.

The nobles gathered together in the Town Hall, to greet their king and hear his wishes, listened sheepishly enough to the royal edict, and looked sulkily at Villon, who paid no attention to their frowns. Gontier de Grigny, of course, was not among them. He, as we know, had quitted Poitou stealthily as soon as he got wind of the coming of the King and had gone no man knew precisely whither. Some of the sullen nobles wished now that they had not been so spry to follow the Lord Gontier's advice as to the treatment of the new lord of Vaucelles. Others, that were more bellicose, regretted, or pretended to regret, that they had not been spryer to follow the Lord Gontier's advice as to expelling Villon from the province by force of arms, though they were glad now that they had not gone so far in their wrath as Gontier would have wished and made an example of him on some public gallows. The man who stood so high in the King's favour the King would most certainly have avenged, and Poitou was too close to Tours to court reprisals.

Now they had Villon for a viceroy and must make the best of a bad business, as a man that has nothing else to eat in Lent must stomach stale eggs. They had their measure of compensation,

however, in the King's announcement of his brother's coming visit to Poitou. This would mean feastings, junketings, joustings, much eating, drinking, singing, dancing ; such a making, baking, and consuming of goose-pies as had not been known in the province for many a long day ; and the washing-down thereof with red rivers of wine, for your goose-pie is a hot and thirsty meat. Also it would mean the seeing Prince Charles, as to whom they were very curious.

Prince Charles was in all ways unlike the King. No one who saw the two men together and who was unaware of their kinship would ever have suspected them to be brothers. Louis, whether from the weight of cares or through the heedlessness of indifference, had permitted his body to surrender to a premature old age and looked as if he carried some twenty more years on his stooped shoulders than those he really bore. Charles, on the contrary, looked younger than his years and heightened his youthful appearance by assiduous attention to his person and his dress. He was a voluptuary ; so, indeed, was Louis ; but Charles was a voluptuary who was also a fop, and who affected to grace the soldier with the gallant and the poet. It was his desire to excel in arms and in love, to be ever the undenied favourite of all fair ladies, to shine a patron of the arts and to set the mode in dress.

The course of a king's son is smoothed to such desires, but the course of a king is smoother, and Charles bitterly resented the injustice of Providence in allowing brother Louis to see the

light before him. Had he been in Louis' place how he would have adorned the throne that Louis disfigured. He would have glittered with the effulgence of a sun-god where that haggard sloven crouched in his own shadow. He would have made the most glorious figure of a glorious court, have wooed and won the loveliest ladies, have patronized poets and painters, and the makers of images; in a word, he would have done those things that it is worth a king's while to do, instead of fussing with burgesses like Louis, and talking about laws.

Charles was so far from being a strong man that he fancied himself a royal Hercules, and thought, with no great consequence of logic, that France longed to be at his nod. Of his fellow-workers in the League of the Public Weal he thought very well, because he was sure that they knew him for their master, and did, or left undone, at his hinted will. Now if Louis were only out of the way—not dead, necessarily, but pleasantly abdicated—what a Charles the Eighth he would make, with his big dukes for bucklers against the gusts of a windy world. He even drifted so far in his dreams as to have a thought for a new coinage and saw himself favourably in delicate relief on pale gold and paler silver, with the fine hair trailing over his nape, and could applaud, after the pencil of the medallist, augustness in the flying forehead and firmness in the flying chin.

But in the meantime Louis was alive and regnant, crippled indeed of wing, pared of claw, mulcted of fat provinces wherein the big dukes sprawled at ease, and Charles for all his gallantry and his

wit, his loving of ladies and his genius for kingship, was no more than a thorn—albeit a very big thorn—in his brother's side. Truly the League of the Public Weal had done well, but it had not done well enough, would not do well enough, would not be really a league of much service to the Public Weal until it had swapped sovereigns, a Charles for a Louis.

At a time when his head was humming with these reflections, at a time when the League of the Public Weal and the treaty of Conflans seemed to have plunged Louis into a condition of humiliation and impotence, Charles' animosity to his brother received a sudden check. Louis, with unexpected graciousness, made his rebellious brother a present of the lordship of Guyenne and Aquitaine. Here was food for wonder. It was for all the world as if your enemy flung away his last quiver of arrows and took to pelting you with roses instead.

Charles was frankly flattered, and his light heart brimmed with easy gratitude. He took possession of his lovely southern lands with no less eagerness than he would have shown in the wooing of a new mistress or the wearing of a new jewel. His sensuous spirit revelled in the strong colours, the heady odours of the south. He had never a sigh of regret for the apple orchards of Normandy, for the chalky cliffs of Normandy. Her cool white and green seemed tame and pale when his eyes feasted on the effulgent tawny and orange and crimson of his new dominion. The troubadour in him sang for joy at the change in his condition; for the moment his yearnings for kingship were lulled by

the present pleasures of Bordeaux, the golden sunlight, the noble wine, the glorious girls. The crown of France must surely come by and by; here, meanwhile, was a little kingdom of delights.

The little kingdom of delights did not reciprocate these raptures. Guyenne, that had been so long English, had grown to consider itself somewhat independent of France, and it sharply resented being handed over thus, without with your leave or by your leave, to the King's brother. The King, well and good; the King was the king, and there an end; but the King's brother was a different business. Guyenne grumbled, Guyenne grunted, Guyenne growled. Guyenne would have resisted if it could. As it could not it submitted very reluctantly, and with gloomy forebodings which were liberally fulfilled.

Charles, whose chief purpose was his own amusement, was by no means the ruler Guyenne wanted, and his conduct as their ruler justified their liveliest apprehensions. He obeyed the scriptural command: he ate his bread with joy and he drank his wine with a merry heart, but he interpreted the word bread in the widest sense to cover all things that feed the senses, and, as the people of Guyenne had to pay for all this in one way or another, Prince Charles soon came to be very sharply detested in his new dominions. To this he was openly indifferent, not so much from heartlessness as from a disbelief that any creature could possibly dislike to be ruled over by so brilliant a sybarite. In which good opinion of himself he was carefully confirmed by his fellow sybarites, the

comely Gascon Lescun chief among them, of whom we shall hear somewhat more.

Guyenne therefore heard with no regret whatever the news of the intended visit of their new lord to his brother in Poitou. If they had heard of their lord's departure for good and all they would only have been the more content, though Charles himself in the fulness of his self-esteem was touched with a strong sense of compassion for his people whom he was obliged to deprive of his lustre for a season. But he soon forgot any such emotion in the preparations for his almost royal progress to Poitou.

His course was carefully marked out for him from Bordeaux, to Fontenay-le-Comte in Lower Poitou, where he was to be met by his brother's envoy and escorted to his brother's arms. His journey was to be made with the utmost leisure ; his halts to be many and prolonged, and wherever he halted the talents and the purses of the inhabitants were to be taxed to the utmost to welcome him with princely lavishness and to furnish him with splendid entertainment. The whole pageant was elaborately arranged by apt, handy Gascon Lescun, great at such a trade. All Guyenne had to do was to pay the bill. Guyenne would have paid the bill many times over if it could have been assured that such payment would assure it freedom for ever from the presence of its prince. Charles, who could not dream of such a thing, had planned with Lescun that the day of his crossing the frontier he would wear a robe of sable as a symbol of his grief in leaving Guyenne and of Guyenne's grief to part with him.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE KING'S ENVOY.

KATHERINE took the news of the advancement of François and his ordered departure with a courteous indifference. She inquired, sourly sweet, if he was to be accompanied on his mission by his friends of Little House, and on being told that this was not so, expressed the fear that he would miss his neighbours very much and would no doubt make haste to return to them.

After this remark, to which Villon made no reply, she dipped him a flowing curtsey. Then she retired to her own room, dismissed her women, and cried quietly for a while. When she came forth again later, there was no trace of tears in her eyes, and she calmly discussed with her husband the arrangements that it was necessary to make in his absence. The pair were perfectly polite ; they acted like the dignified representatives of rival powers, formal, precise and suave in their carriage and conversation.

Of course, Villon longed to clip her in his arms, to cry " Kiss and be friends," but this he neither dared nor chose to do. He feared that Katherine's sullen mood would never be so softened, that she

would scorn him for the breaking of his vow ; and that to win her, if he were to win her again, he must play the man and wait, with time and chance for his lieutenants. So it was with a sad heart and a smiling face that he went about his bitter task.

His first care was to scheme and establish a regular system of communication between Vaucelles and Tours, where the King now lay, and between Vaucelles and Fontenay, where he was to meet the Prince. To this end he converted his five friends from Paris into King's messengers, whose part it was to ride swift horses and carry letters at a top speed from point to point between the three places. As the jolly fellows were well paid and smartly clad, and as they liked the open air well enough, they took very kindly to the proposed project, which made them persons of distinction and importance, not merely in their own eyes—for there is always something tempting to your reformed or semi-reformed rogue in a government appointment—but in the eyes of the landlords, landladies and waiting-maids of those taverns where they must needs make brief halt for refreshment in the various villages through which their course of duty must carry them.

Villon felt that he could rely upon the services of the queer fraternity, for he guessed, and guessed rightly, that his own worldly prosperity tempted them to attain a measure of ease and competence not to be vouchsafed by fortune to their ways of depredation. It was better to be someone else's men and grow fat, than be their own masters and starve ; it was better to ride the King's horses than

swing from the King's gibbets. So here were a quince of vagabonds transmuted into a flying post.

The King's envoy had another problem to consider. Should he or should he not command the attendance of certain of the nobility of Upper Poitou to ride with him to Fontenay? On due consideration, he decided that he should not. Though the Upper Poitevins were obliged to accept his lieutenancy, especially with his gracious Majesty so close a neighbour at Tours, they were very sulky about the business, and when they waited upon King Louis in the court house at Poitiers had, as we know, greeted the King's decision with as wry faces as they dared to wear in his presence.

Louis saw those wry faces and rejoiced in them. Poitou was lukewarm in his cause; Laodicean; at best it faced both ways like Janus; at worst, it was suspected to wear a smiling face only for the King's enemies. Too cautious or too sleepy to take sides, they certainly showed no zeal in the King's interest, and it may be that the vicinity of Tours, where Louis was powerful, was the most cogent argument to enforce from them a lip and skin-deep civility.

Hence the King's malicious delight in rubbing the gall of Villon's lieutenanship upon the raw that Villon's presence as lord of Vaucelles had already made upon their susceptibilities. In which impishness Louis acted with his usual thoughtfulness. He punished the Poitevins for their half-heartedness, and if they in revenge took occasion to knock the King's lieutenant on the head the King would never shed a tear thereat.

Now undoubtedly many of the little nobles of Upper Poitou would have liked well enough to ride to Fontenay to meet Prince Charles, even in company with a viceroy whose name happened to be François Villon. So when Villon sent them word in the King's name to hold themselves ready to do honour to Prince Charles on his later visit to Poitiers, and asked none of them to accompany him to Fontenay, not a few of them were very sulky at the time—though they had reason to bless Villon's decision afterwards—at being thus left out in the cold, and were inclined in their hearts to regret that they had not been less unbending in their attitude towards the lord of Montcorbier and Vaucelles on his first arrival among them.

If Gontier de Grigny had been with them he might have spurred, urged, persuaded, or compelled some of them to go with him to Fontenay with Villon's leave or without Villon's leave. But Grigny, as he have seen, had already quitted his castle and the province in a huff, and the other lords and lordlings were leaderless folk, too indolent, too sleepy, too fond of their wine and their goosepies and their wives to take action of any kind unless they were goaded thereto by some hot commanding spirit. Such a hot commanding spirit was Grigny's, but Grigny was abroad, and, indeed, no man regretted his absence, for now, in addition to their other reason to dislike him, was added the fact that it was he who had made them assume towards Villon an attitude they were beginning secretly to deplore. So they yawned and shrugged their shoulders and did nothing.

This matter satisfactorily arranged, Villon left some fifty lances in Vaucelles under the command of his well trusted lieutenant the war-weathered veteran Bertran, took a grave and stately farewell of his lady, and set off at the head of two hundred lances to meet the Prince at Fontenay, the principal town of Lower Poitou. At Fontenay the Prince was to bide a week to enjoy the festivities that were to be given in his honour by the nobility of the lower province, and from Fontenay he was to proceed, escorted by Villon, to Vaucelles by easy stages. At Vaucelles he was to find his loving brother Louis waiting for him and eager to take him in his arms. So mortals piece together the delicate mechanism of their plans, and seldom weigh a doubt as to the reliability of the clockwork.

There was a town nigh midway between Vaucelles and Fontenay at which Villon and his company halted for the night. The next day brought them to Fontenay, and to the presence of the Prince, who had already arrived, and who was enjoying himself mightily as the hero of the hour. Wherever Prince Charles went he spared no pains of brave apparel and fair speech to make himself popular. He greeted his brother's envoy very cordially, for if he had heard and smiled at the story of the exaltation of a penniless poet, he had also read and sighed over some of the same poet's verses, and being, or wishing to be, esteemed as a poet himself and a patron of the Muses, he thought it became him to cherish, or, at least, to profess a belief in the equality of a man of genius with a prince of the royal blood. So he beamed his brightest upon

Villon, whose eyes had long since ceased to be dazzled by the glitter of princes and who held his own with the greatest by his discretion no less than by his wit.

The young and debonair Prince was already in the thick of more than one love affair. That is to say, he had cast approving glances on more than one fair face, and his faithful intimates were busy in ascertaining for their gallant master where his light heart would be sure to prove the conqueror without inconvenience, peril or discomfiture to its possessor. For if Charles was not unreasonably careful of his life, his intimates were excessively careful for him. They wanted him to be King of France as much as ever he wanted himself to be King of France. Thus while Prince Charles would perchance have made no dishonourable compromises with any danger, his favourites took thought to make them for him. A brother's jealous dagger, a husband's jealous axe might deal him such a dark night's death as had been dealt to the gay Duke of Orleans, no longer than two reigns back, and with no Prince Charles alive to make a king of, where were the favourites' hopes, dreams, desires, ambitions ; where were the titles, the honours, the lands, the treasures, the pleasures that were the fees of them that served a merry king ?

Of all the Prince's favourites the most influential was the Gascon Lescun. There are Gascons and Gascons. Not all are fire-eaters, swashbucklers, parti-coloured soldiers of fortune with plumage of cocks' feathers, and eloquence of devil-may-care

oaths. There be some that are soft and cunning and politic, with wits of steel sheathed in indolent bodies, that suck from the vineyards of the south a love of luxury, of lightly yielding ladies, of purple and fine linen, of warm beds and delicate meats and much taking of ease and the way to wealth through influence over princes. Of such Gascons was the Gascon Lescun that was Charles's favourite. He was not himself warlike, though he appraised Charles as own brother to Mars ; he had an unfailing eye for a fair woman, and an unfailing wit to gauge her possibilities of pliancy or defiance. He never loved woman so well that he would not give way without a sigh—nay, rather, smiling blithely—to his royal master. He seemed finely idle, loving to sprawl on sunny terraces and eat figs, loving voluptuous songs and lazy dances. With his ample smile and his large devotion to the senses you would never have taken him for a schemer ; he seemed shaped by nature for no other work than to play master of the ceremonies at a Court of Love, and arbiter of profligacies and gluttonies. But he luted upon Charles with his musician's fingers, moving him to what tune he pleased, and, seeming to do nothing, did all.

This gentleman welcomed Villon very pleasantly, taking it for granted, seeing his rapid advancement, that the Parisian played the same part with Louis that the Gascon played with Charles ; that in a word he pulled the strings of policy and overcrowded Olivier and Tristan as Lescun overcrowded the lesser favourites of his Prince. So he made much

of Villon, respecting him as a man who had moved a great way in the world, and treating him as those that have climbed from depth to height should treat their peers. Both of them, he took it for granted, looked upon themselves as actors that played their parts in a prime and shining comedy—and here, indeed, Villon was at one with him. He also took it for granted—in which he was wrong—that Villon served Louis, as he served Charles, solely for his own purposes and advancement.

From the first Villon took not unkindly to the man. His dramatic sense appreciated the new, the unfamiliar character; he found him a kind of René de Montigny on a large scale, far more charming, far more open-faced and playful, far more deadly. Lescun attached himself to Villon, paid him all manner of attentions, questioned him about Louis and Louis' plans with an engaging candour and a disarming directness, and saw to it that Charles was as 'flattering affable as his man. François took all courtesies with great show of satisfaction, answered all questions with a volubility of confidence that disclosed naught, and kept his place in the Prince's regard.

The days at Fontenay passed merrily enough. The brisk little town—for Lower Poitou was of a livelier temper than the upper province—was delighted to entertain so joyous a Prince, and as day succeeded day each brought its own tribute of festivity, its pageant or play or procession, its dance, its banquets, its masque. Into all these revels the Prince threw himself with a headlong

enthusiasm that was familiar habit. He had followed pleasure so long and so passionately, eating her honey-cakes, drinking her wine, performing all her rites with such a zest, that a body never strong had, through this ill-usage, grown frail.

But the desire for all delights seemed to wax with the waning strength. The Prince's senses were never satiated, never restrained. Here Lescun could do nothing, though he would gladly have checked the Prince's ardours and appetites, if he might, for the life of Charles was very precious to him. But the influence he had won by pampering his master's fancies would only be perilled now by seeking to chasten them. All he and his fellows could do, in their solicitude for a Prince who hoped to fill the throne of France, was to make sure that the wine he would drink was the ripest, and to warder him in his love-quests from the strokes of jealousy. Wherefore it often happened that care had her lodging in the Gascon's heart while laughter reigned on his well-coloured face.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FLYING POST.

TOWARDS the end of the week that had been set down for the period of the Prince's stay in Fontenay some jousts had been arranged for Charles's diversion in certain pleasant meadows that lay north of the little town. The morning was bright; the lists were prettily disposed. In a gallery draped with rich silks the Prince sat with many fair ladies and eager courtiers about him, and watched the gentlemen of his following compete with the notables of the neighbourhood in the mimic war. Villon sat a little apart, and because he was inclined to be moody Lescun had quitted him, for it was one of Lescun's arts to know when a man would wish to be left in peace.

In fact, Villon's heart was as heavy within him as if he had overeaten of sour bread, and he was not to be diverted from his gloom by the armour, the trappings and caparisons of the tournament, nor by the laughter of women, nor by the humours of the little crowd of common folk that watched and applauded their betters outside the painted

barriers. His fancy passed to the free fields beyond and the road that led home. The word "home" seemed to mock him; was he not more homeless truly now, with Vaucelles for his own, than when he had lolled and snored in the Fircone Tavern? He had no news of Katherine; he had hoped without hope to have news. Casin Cholet had come in from Tours three days earlier with brief word from Louis, but Cholet had not seen Katherine and carried no message from her, and on his return journey Villon bade him make straight for Tours without pause at Vaucelles. Since then he had heard nothing from King or from wife.

A flourish of trumpets told him that two fresh knights were about to try the skill of their steeds and the strength of their spears, and the ladies clapped their hands lustily as the champions entered the arena and saluted the Prince before taking their appointed places to wait the signal. Now while these diversions were toward, Villon, who began to find them a little wearisome because of what seemed to be their formality and perfunctoriness, that made him sigh for the libertine hilarity of the Court of Miracles, chanced to lift his eyes and see something that seized his attention.

Far away on the white riband of road that divided with its clean-cut bar the green plains and ran straight as a canal between its wall of poplars, he saw a little rolling cloud of dust that appeared to be puffing steadily in the direction of the Prince's camp. Villon, little interested in the gilded frivolities about him, the languid voluptuousness,

the pinchbeck chivalry, found himself suddenly, he knew not why, curiously attracted by that drifting dust.

Ever⁷ and⁴ ever it drew nearer, and in a little while Villon could distinguish in the thick of the cloud a horseman that was pounding along at a great rate, as one³ that was spurred by urgent business. Then a sudden rift in the white wrack showed a gleam of two bright colours, a bright blue and a bright silver, and instantly Villon knew that the hurrying rider was one of his own messengers. Without delay or apology to the Prince, who was tickling a lady's elbow and whispering in her ear, Villon quitted the gallery, and making his way to the outskirts of the lists, passed through the obsequious heralds and solemn warders to await on the open meadow land the coming of him that rode so furiously.

He had not long to wait. In a few minutes the messenger was clearly visible, a gleaming thing of argent and azure with two white wings of dust cloud drifting behind him fantastically. In another few minutes the wild rider had caught sight of the figure of Villon, had covered the few remaining yards that lay between him that rode and him that waited, and bringing his steaming horse to a halt, had rolled from his saddle and tumbled on his knees, for very weariness of riding, at Villon's feet.

A big red face fringed with yellow hair stared up at Villon, a face that was wet with sweat, and grimy with caked dust, and flaming with hot news, the face of Guy Tabarie.

"My lord," he gasped, "my lord," and then

could say no more, but began to cough and wheeze. Villon plucked him to his feet.

"Your news," he shouted; "your news, man," and shook him as he spoke by the shoulders, heedless of the idlers around that were staring at the encounter. Guy Tabarie gave a gasp and found his voice and spoke.

"My lord, the devil is let loose in Poitou. Madmen are abroad in arms. The Castle of Grigny has perished in flame. So has the Castle of Little House. The Castle of Vaucelles is in peril."

The fingers of Villon gripped into the flesh of Tabarie like steel into butter.

"Katherine," he screamed hoarsely, "Katherine——" He could say no more, but Tabarie answered his unspoken thoughts.

"Vaucelles is safe yet," he spluttered. "It was safe when I left and should hold out long enough. But no man can surely say what may happen when things are as they are."

Villon dragged Tabarie aside, while his angry glance scattered all listeners.

"Tell me a plain tale," he commanded.

But a plain tale was just what Tabarie found it hard to tell. He was as one drunk with his recent speed; he was brimmed with the importance of bad news that upsets weak wits; he was honestly concerned and honestly perturbed. But at last Villon pieced a coherent narrative from his stammerings and blasphemies.

The wretched peasants of Upper Poitou had somehow risen in revolt against their lords, like the Jacks of an earlier generation. They had some-

how surprised the Castle of Grigny, weakly held in the absence of its lord, had slain all its defenders, and after seizing great store of arms, had given its strong walls to the fire. Leaving blackened ruins behind them where Grigny once had defied the winds, they had swept along, more dangerous now for their better armament and their provision of food and drink, to the castle of the Lord Guy of Beaumains, which, taken unawares, and, as it was said, sapped by strange treachery within, had yielded with ominous ease, and in its turn, after supplying the marauders with weapons and victuals, had seen its strong walls and its slaughtered garrison wither in flame.

By this time the news of the rising began to spread, and with the news to spread a common terror. No one knew the strength of the peril to be faced. Many recalled the horrors of the Jacquerie, horrors that seemed now rekindled. There seemed to be neither time nor opportunity for concerted action against a danger that showed the more terrible the more it was unknown. Every lord lifted his portcullis and manned his walls for himself, eagerly and fearfully watching the horizon for the rising flames that told of the triumphs of the rioters. Poitiers itself was said to be on the defensive, day and night.

As for Vaucelles—and Villon was proud of the news from Vaucelles—the first tidings it seemed had turned the Lady Katherine into an amazon. Not only was the castle made ready in a twinkling for a siege, but instantly on the coming of the ill-tidings she had swept out with twenty men

and brought in, almost by force it was said, the lord of Little House and his daughter, with all their small following, only a breathing time before the rebels came down upon the helpless mansion, sacking, pillaging, but this time happily not slaying, for they found no one to slay. On that very notch of time Montigny had despatched him, Guy Tabarie, at a gallop towards Villon at the Prince's camp, and Colin de Cayeulx, also at a gallop, to his Majesty at Tours. Even as Tabarie rode, he declared, he could see behind him the black hordes about the walls of Vaucelles and could faintly hear their shouts of menace.

A few seconds later an angry man that was calm in spite of his anger, and whose spare body seemed all informed with resolute determination, plumped himself down by the side of the Prince in the tapestried gallery. The Prince, who was still whispering in the lady's ear, but was now tickling the lady's palm, turned in some irritation to see who it was that thus ventured to disturb his pleasures. His haughty gaze encountered the snapping eyes and forward chin of Villon.

"Ah, my lord of Montcorbier," he began, with his frown fading to a smile, for he had a liking for poets and all such brighteners of life. But Villon cut him short.

"Your Highness," he said, "news comes to me hot foot of trouble in Poitou ; such trouble as will make it at this present unfitting for your welcome. The Jacks have risen in revolt."

"The Jacks," echoed Prince Charles, knitting his fine eyebrows, while the lady beside him showed

all the symptoms of a lively annoyance, "the Jacks. It should not take long to sweep them into submission."

"I hope not, Highness," Villon answered gravely. "I will do my best, and with your permission will set about it at once."

"Nay, my dear lord," said the Prince cheerfully, "we cannot spare you from our sports. Let the lords of Poitou do their duty and we can tarry here a while longer till they have done it."

"By your favour, Highness," Villon retorted, "I am his Majesty's lieutenant in Upper Poitou, and, as such, responsible to him for the well-being of his appanage. But if I were no such thing I should still be stirring, for my own dwelling is threatened, and my wife inside that dwelling, so with your leave, or by your leave, I go at once."

A frown floated over Charles's pale face, for he was ill used to have his wishes crossed, and to be contradicted by a mountebank, as in his heart he esteemed Villon, was fretting indeed. But in his new amity with his brother he saw that it would not be politic to quarrel with his brother's representative, and besides, if Upper Poitou were really so uncomfortable it would be just as well to dally in Lower Poitou till Villon had made the place presentable. Had the trouble been one of knights and lords, where ancient banners fluttered and famous coats glittered, Charles, to be honest with him, would have flung his pleasures by and ridden to the fray like a soldier. But a question of Jacks, of foul peasants, of vermin, might very well be left to a mountebank to manage. Let his lordship

of Montcorbier do dirty work and besom a clean path through Poitou for lords and ladies to walk upon. So the frown on Charles's face faded and changed into a smile.

"Go your ways, my lord," he said, "and God speed, for we hear that you have a fair wife, and your place is by her side if she be in any danger."

The Prince had scarcely finished his speech ere Villon had disappeared. Charles turned to his companion and took her hand again and paddled with its palm, while she smiled up at him.

"Our brother has strange servants," he said sneeringly; "servants who seem always in a hurry."

Then he set himself to the pleasant task of calming the lady's easily aroused fears, assuring her with many caresses that there was no chance of the Jacks troubling their peace, as they would remain pleasantly where they were until they heard from the mountebank that it was safe to proceed on their way to Upper Poitou. This amiable task accomplished, Charles set himself with new zest to the enjoyment of the entertainment in the lists until it was time to leave the gallery to sit at a banquet. Meanwhile Villon, with his little regiment at his heels, was riding as if the devil were behind him towards Vaucelles.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FRANCISCAN'S HARVEST.

THE next day's dawn was not an hour old when Villon and his lances rode through the wood on the crest of the hill and saw Vaucelles-les-Tours lying at their feet a mile away. They had come at the quickest of their speed; they had halted no longer than was essential for the horses and helpful for the men; now, at least, they were sure that they had arrived in time.

During the silence of the ride Villon kept asking himself agonizing questions that here obtained their happy answer. Vaucelles had not shared the fate of Grigny, of Beaumains, and of Petitmanoir. The towers of the famous stronghold stood unchanged in the clear air, and from the battlements a gaudy banner fluttered the blue and silver of Vaucelles upon the morning wind. But if the castle showed the same as ever, its environment was strangely unfamiliar. The ground about the fortress was covered by bodies of men, some hundreds in number, who were moving hither and thither with great animation in the furtherance of their audacious siege.

That they had made some progress in their purpose

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was visible in an instant. The outer defences, barbicans and barriers, which defended the moat, were plainly in their hands, and though the waters of the moat lay between them and the walls of the fortress, the besiegers were evidently busying themselves in devising means for crossing the moat and bringing the assault to closer quarters. It was easy to see that the Jacks had learned some rudiments of the art of war from their observation of the conduct of their betters. Rudely formed but efficient shields and palisades of wood had been hurriedly, but not undexterously, put together; a floating bridge, by whose means the moat might be crossed, was being constructed; while huge piles of tree-trunks and faggots of boughs showed that their assailants relied here, as they had relied elsewhere, upon the confederacy of fire. All this Villon and his following saw in a rapid glance without pausing, then setting spurs to their horses the cavalcade descended the hill at a gallop.

Now was the arrival of the newcomers for the first time observed alike by those that were so mightily busy seeking to beat a way through the tough walls of Vaucelles and those behind its battlements that were no less resolute to keep their enemies without. The shrill voices of trumpets proclaimed the welcome that the besieged offered to the reinforcements, while fierce shouts came from the assailants, who, hastily abandoning their immediate designs upon the castle, hurriedly gathered themselves together into such imitation of military formation as they could compass to resist those that they knew must prove their foes.

Villon with his lances swept down the hill like a wind of steel. The breeze of the morning brought its coolness to his helmeted head where the fires of many fears and hopes and wonders blended their conflagration. Fear for the safety of Katherine had ever been the giant of his wrestling thoughts. Against that fear the Samson of his hope to be in time to save her had wrestled as the Israelite had wrestled with the angel. But there was a third force that battled in his brain and strove alternately and at once with the striving Titans, a force of wonder as to the cause, the reason, the excuse or justification of the upheaval that had brought beggars and peasants from their dens to beat with their fists against the doors of princes.

Everything in this world has a cause, a reason, an excuse, or a justification. What was to be said for this business? Who had brought from Heaven or Hell the spark that set this fire alight? What breath had fanned it to this blaze? These were the thoughts that had rent his spirit as he rode through the evening and the dusk and the darkness and the dawn. These were the thoughts that fretted him still as he sped down the hill. Katherine was safe. The banner flying from the keep told him so much. He was in time to fight for her, to die, if needs must, in her defence. The state of the assailants' preparations made that plain. But who were those assailants, and what impulse, what wrong, what madness had prompted them to assail?

As the riders came within range of the ragged levies that faced their advance a flight of arrows

was directed against them. But the bows were handled by unfamiliar fingers ; no trained eyes guided the course of the bolts, and the shafts either sang past, flying wide, or buried themselves harmlessly in earth, or rattled, inoffensive, against armour too obdurate for such unskilful, forceless missiles.

Instantly Villon lifted his hand and ordered a halt. Then, taking his horse at a walking pace, and bidding his troop follow him at an easy distance, he advanced towards the belligerents, who, astonished and discomfited by the failure of their artillery, and amazed by the composure of the horsemen, awaited his coming in uneasy rage.

Villon studied his opponents curiously as he leisurely lessened the distance between them. It was indeed a strange horde that faced him, bewildering as the figures of a sick dream. Hundreds of wretched creatures were gathered there on the trampled earth. It was like the Court of Miracles on a vast scale, and the more strange for its assemblage in those free fields than in the narrow streets and crooked usages of the heart of Paris. For if in the howling crowd before him there were many on the very front of the press that were tramps and beggars, tinkers and vagabonds, highway thieves and byway skulkers, these, it was plain, were but incidents in that composite army of despair.

The most of those hundreds of furious creatures were peasants, such fellows as dwelt in the cabins, huts, hovels, styes that studded the estates of great lords. These wretches toiled in their squalor,

starved, stank ; were harried worse than beasts, were taxed, thrashed, lashed, hanged at the will of their masters. They knew neither joy in the present nor hope for the future.

They lived—if that could be called life—in cold and hunger and thirst and dirt, at the will, the caprice of the castles. Their bodies were of less value than those of the furred and feathered peoples of the woods ; their only purpose was to stir the soil that others might feed on its fruits. They had no pleasures. Famine always clung them ; they never knew the poor gratification of a full meal. Untaught, unguided, unpitied, their spirits were as miserable as their bodies. Animal-like they coupled ; animal-like they bred other wretches in their image ; animal-like they died as they had lived, in a dull wonder at the world that so misused them, in a dull patience under the misuse.

Villon knew something of them, but not much. The poor of a great city were indeed his familiars, but he was too new to lordship to have much knowledge of the poor of the fields and of the forests. He had seen but little of the peasantry of Vaucelles and less of the peasantry of other parts of the province ; he had other things to think of, other things to do, in his brief time of gentility. Now he knew that he was meeting with the peasantry of Poitou.

Only in some painted Hell, only in some dream of fever did it seem possible for such hideous images to be conjured, and these were human beings, children of God, with red blood in their veins and

white souls in their bodies. Villon's stomach seemed to turn at the near sight of them, and he felt naked for all his armour from very rigour of sickness. Nausea burned his throat and his head swam as he surveyed the fierce, uncouth creatures that faced him, and dared, in defiance of kings and princes, to call themselves men. The devils that he had seen painted in the Death-dances on cemetery walls were not more foul, more misshapen, more grotesque. Some there were that crouched and gibbered like apes, the sounds they made seemingly unhuman and meaningless. Some there were that seemed like the wild men of fire-side legends, stubborn as tree-trunks and black and savage, such monsters as the fearful believe to haunt unhallowed woods and the recesses of accursed caves. Others again were mere scraggs of skin and bone, grinning like idiots, the torches of madness burning in their dreadful eyes. Mingled with these were figures more manlike, fellows that might, had occasion served and life smiled, have made wholesome citizens, tall soldiers, sturdy users of the sea. And these in their rags and their degradation were even more pathetic to behold than the abortions in whose company they were enlisted by the old recruiting sergeant whose name is hunger.

One of the oddest facts about that ragged regiment was the grim incongruity of its attire. For while the bulk were tattered enough and showed their blackened skins through their clouts, very many were grotesquely bedizened with the spoils of their recent victories. Some wore the tabard of a noble over their nakedness, while others went

in the silken gowns of women, trussed up nearly to their middles for the greater freedom of their legs. The effect of these smears of colour upon the blackness of the bulk of squalor had something of the same terrifying quality as have the raddled cheeks of an idol and the blood-botched hands of a butcher.

There was too a quantity of knightly armour distributed, insufficiently and foolishly, among the fearsome crew. For one man would have a helmet and another a hauberk, and another would sport the greaves and cuishes upon his legs while his trunk was unprotected. And one would trail a tilting lance, less serviceable in such conditions than a cudgel, and one would try to balance with unpractised hands the weight of a huge two-handed sword, and one more would poise a baron's battle-axe as one that was a wood-cutter and had found a weapon familiar to his grip; and yet another patted lovingly the dagger of mercy thrust in his girdle. The larger part of those that were weaponed at all had scythe-blades on shafts, and sickles, and woodmen's axes, while many had bows which they had little skill to use. But the bulk were no better armed than with staves of wood, or bludgeons spiked with nails.

There were things in that company more terrible than their arms. For now, as if newly conscious of the approach of hostile numbers, some of the rebels began to push their way from the back of the throng, and these lifted up spears and pitchforks that carried horrid trophies. Severed human heads stared in rigidity of pain and fear

over the huddled ranks of revolt. One of these, with its long hair ironically crowned with a twisted coronet of plaited straw, Villon thought to bear the features of the lord of Beaumains. Another that had a carrot jammed into its parted jaws he recognized as the head of the tyrannous bailiff of Vaucelles, Guillaume Cardon, and the man that carried this standard was one of the deer-slayers that Villon had spared, and his comrade was by his side. None of the other heads were familiar to him; they were mostly, no doubt, the heads of fighting-men that had fallen desperately, helplessly, in the defence of Beaumains. One head, alas, was a woman's, and Villon's senses sickened as he saw. He knew that the dead bailiff was a merciless brute; he knew that Beaumains was a cruel lord and his wife a cruel lady; he knew that de Grigny's people, like de Grigny himself, were men of blood, men of lust, men with no bowels of pity where a man's money or a woman's honour was to be snatched. But at the sight of those fragments of humanity it needed all his compassion, all his sense of justice, to restrain him from hurling his force against those murderers, bidding his men ride them down, and slay them without quarter where they stood or ran. With a mighty effort he swallowed his blood-rage, checked his hand and stayed his voice, and stared at his antagonists with a face of stone.

There reigned a kind of cruel stillness for a while. It seemed to Villon as if he saw all that was happening spread out before him like a painted cloth; on the one side those legionaries of famine and

despair, hate and rage, and on the other the glowing mass of his two hundred lances, steel-plated, steel-weaponed, the invincible instrument of kings. For a moment he felt like a tame spectator, sitting at a play, and seeing two mimic forces clash ; for a moment it seemed to him as if the sun stood still as at Ajalon. Then he cried out, and his voice sounded strange and hoarse in his ears like the voice of a man calling for help, as he asked them who they were and what they wanted, and who their leader was that he might speak with him.

At first the multitude seemed to sway with indecision ; then some shrieked unmeaning execrations and some howled that they had no leaders ; that all were equal in their fellowship ; and the like vain sayings. But at the last one of the number that stood in the front rank stepped forward, a mighty man with a scar on his left brow. He carried a mighty staff and seemed to be no peasant, but rather a wayside robber. This fellow declared, in speech quite articulate and intelligible, that he would take it upon himself to play the voice for his comrades. First, they wanted food ; next, they wanted drink ; thirdly, they wanted clothes to cover their nakedness ; fourthly and lastly, they wanted, food, drink, and clothes, and meant to have them.

When he had made an end of speaking a roar of approval from his companions applauded his utterance. The fellow stood well forward, leaning upon his big stick for all the world like an ironic St. Christopher. But while he had spoken Villon's swooning senses had returned to him. This brawny

giant was no starving peasant ; his poverty was of another kind ; he was very plainly a humble member of the illustrious brotherhood of thieves. He remembered now that he had seen the face with its scar before on the day of the Dole at Poitiers.

"Friend," said Villon, "how is it that you speak the woes of this people? You are no peasant ; the toil of your hands is no honest toil. You are a hedge-skulker, a marauder of the highway, a child of the twilight. Who are you that you should speak for the workers?"

The man eyed him insolently, roguishly. "I believe I have as good a right to speak for them as another thief," he protested, mockingly. "You are, I think, my lord of Montcorbier, my great lord of Vaucelles. It was you who gave the push that set this ball a-rolling. It was you who blew the spark that set the forest on fire. I heard you, lord of Montcorbier, before the Cathedral at Poitiers, when you spoke words of fire to the frozen wretches in front of you about the equality of mankind, the poor man's rights in Heaven and on earth. You sowed the seeds that raised this whirlwind, we practise what you preach, and I think your name is François Villon, thief of Paris."

For an instant Villon winced at the words ; then the prick of personal pain vanished in the sorrow of his heart for the poor creatures before him. Once again his teaching had borne bitter fruit. Heedless of the beggarman with the scar he addressed the multitude.

"Brothers," he cried, "I pity you with all my heart, for I hold you to be the children of God as

directly as the noble in his stronghold or the King upon his throne. You have wrongs, you have sorrows ; your backs bend with the weight of them. But you may not mend your woes with flame and slaughter. Were I the King, I would feed your hunger, I would slake your thirst, I would clothe your bodies, I would lighten your hearts, and think myself the better King for gaining happier subjects. But in this land I am only the King's servant and I will serve my master and my master's laws. You have killed men, you have burned dwellings, you have plundered ; you must kill and burn and plunder no more. If ye hear me ye shall go in peace. Throw down your useless weapons, disperse to such hiding as ye can find and I will plead with the King for your pardon, for truly I think you have been goaded to this sin by bitter injuries."

Villon's voice shook as he spoke and his eyes were wet with grief, but the savage men stared at him stupidly and the scarred beggarman shook with laughter so that for a little while he could find no breath wherewith to speak.

CHAPTER XXV.

A SORTIE AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

Now by this time those that were within the castle and that had seen the new posture of affairs were making ready for the lowering of the drawbridge that they might, by a timely sally, aid the newcomers to disperse the rabble and raise the siege. None of those that were upon the walls could hear what Villon said to the Jacks or what the Jacks said to Villon, but it amazed the besieged not a little to find that any parley was going forward. What those upon the battlements had expected to see after the armed men came over the crest of the hill and began to descend its slope at a gallop was the continuance of the charge straight into the astonished ranks of the Jacks and their discomfiture and putting to flight with much slaughter by the disciplined troops.

It was with no small surprise, therefore, that they beheld the leader of the lances bring his men to a halt after the discharge of arrows from the enemy and going towards them proceed to engage them in speech. But when the business of lowering the drawbridge was begun and the great causeway hung suspended in mid-air by its chains, those that

stood in the gateway could hear something of what was being spoken. Among those so standing and hearkening was one in man's armour that showed a woman's face under her helmet, and the woman's eyes were wide with wonder, and the woman's face was set with anger as the words came floating to her ears across the moat.

"Now, by the Mass," she said, "it is a vile thing that a king's man should parley with these Jacks. I think we must show this laggard an example. Let down the drawbridge."

When she said this the chains began to creak again and she did not hear the reply of the beggarman when he had made an end of his foul laughter.

"Excellent gentleman," he mocked, "you can preach in steel it seems as well as in homespun, but you preach now to deaf ears. I have not carried your words hither and thither for nothing; I have not raised you this regiment of disciples to see them melt before a few smooth words of yours now that you have changed your tune. If you were honest in your Sunday sermon, send these soldiers of yours to the rightabout and tender your castle and your goods to the children of God. We will do you no hurt, for the sake of your good advice, but we must have your wife's life because of her scorn of the poor folk."

Now when Villon heard this he thanked God that he had come when he did come, and he was minded to make the world the richer by the corpse of one beggarman. Yet he called out again to the crowd, bidding them begone before it was too late,

but the mob only howled at him and the beggarman scoffed, swearing that they were strong enough to eat his soldiers, and at that moment the drawbridge came down to its moorings with a thud.

Instantly over the levelled bridge dashed a little company of cavaliers with the woman that was in armour with drawn sword at their head, and these charged with levelled lances upon the besiegers. Katherine, for the amazon was she, shouted to Villon as she rode: "Follow now if you will not lead," and so whirled by, taking both the lances and the rabble by surprise by her sudden action. The Jacks, for all they were over a thousand men, and their assailants were less than fifty, wavered and gave way before the attack, opening a pathway through which the little company rode. In another moment that company would have been swallowed up by the numbers of the rallying mass of Jacks when Villon, in a rapture at Katherine's courage and in a rage at her folly, shouted to his men to charge and drove his horse after her.

Though the Jacks were still as four to one against their assailants, they could make no serious stand against that avalanche of well-trained steel-clad troops. Some indeed fought desperately, with the desperation of defeat, flinging themselves upon the terrible lances and endeavouring by mere weight of numbers to unhorse individual riders. But for the most part they scattered, scampering like rabbits to cover, making with amazing swiftness for the shelter of the neighbouring woods, where pursuit would be impossible for horsemen. It was at no

time a battle after Villon had led his charge ; only a scuffle that soon became a rout and a stampede, and though many of the Jacks, both resisting and fleeing, were killed, not one of the soldiers was hurt to his death.

When Katherine and her little handful of followers flung so recklessly into the peasants' ranks they made for the moment a lane for themselves, but only for the moment. Even the terror that the peasants felt of steel-clad soldiers and superior weapons was not great enough to allow less than fifty men to put to rout a force of many hundreds. The Jacks swept up and around the sudden attack, catching at horses' bridles, catching at stirrups, clutching fiercely at the steel-clad men as they rode. Had the fifty been alone they would soon have been made an end of. The huge beggarman seized Katherine's horse by the bridle with one hand and brought it to a standstill by sheer strength, while with the other he lifted his massive club and struck her lifted sword out of her hand as easily as he might have flung away a straw. A sea of insurgents was all about the little company, and those of the peasants who had been in the background and knew really very little of what had been happening might very well think that their enemies were in their hands. Then came the charge of the two hundred and the scattering of the Jacks.

Villon rode straight upon the beggarman as he tried to drag Katherine from her horse and struck him a good blow over the right temple, inflicting just such another wound as that of which he bore

the scar on the other temple. The man dropped without a groan and Villon and Katherine rode together side by side in silence over the conquered field, their hearts on fire with very different emotions. Katherine was raging because she had lost her sword, because a Jack had dared to lay a hand on her, because her lord had paltered with rebels, and because she owed her safety to her lord. Villon was full of a great joy that he had saved his headstrong, mad mistress, and full of a great sorrow for the poor mutineers that he had been obliged to shatter and slay. So they rode together side by side in silence over the conquered field.

But while the general rout and dispersal of the Jacks was taking place and the bulk of that savage battalion was either flying from the field or remaining upon it incapable of flight or fight thenceforward, another thing happened which had not been expected or guarded against. When those of the peasants that were hurled to the right by the irresistible pressure of that wedge of steel sought safety in the cover of the neighbouring woods, those on the left found an unexpected outlet, or rather inlet, at their command. The drawbridge over which the little party from Vaucelles had ridden was still down, the portcullis of Vaucelles was still up. By an attraction natural and irresistible a great wave of desperate men flooded across the one, flooded through the other. These found themselves within the bailey of Vaucelles, and, as it would seem for the moment, lords of the castle that had flung forth already the sum of its defenders.

The invaders' shouts of triumph attracted to

them others of that wrecked army, and in a few seconds some hundreds of furious men were raging and raving in the bailey of Vaucelles, thundering against every closed door that presented itself as an obstacle to their rage and eagerly shrieking one to another for fuel to burn down opposition.

It was not until Villon, having cut down the burly beggarman, found himself still holding Katherine's bridle on the fringe of the distant woods, that the loud shouts and cries behind him warned him of some new peril. Turning to survey the field which his lances had swept clean, he saw to his dismay that a party of the Jacks had then taken possession of the castle and were proceeding with great alacrity to haul up the drawbridge. While he hurriedly dispatched a squire to recall his men from further pursuit, and employ them in dealing with this new danger, he spurred forward with Katherine by his side, and rallying every man-at-arms he went towards the castle, such Jacks as still lingered outside it flying like rats.

The drawbridge once up, it would be as hopeless for him and his to effect a rescue of the stronghold and its remaining inmates as it had seemed hopeless for the Jacks before his arrival to effect an entrance. But even as he rode and watched the drawbridge slowly lifted into the air, its machinery worked by eager, if inexperienced, fingers, and while his ear could catch only too plainly the shouts of hate and shrieks of defiance that came from the mad mob inside the bailey, even on the instant, when the position seemed most critical, it changed.

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The cries of hatred and of menace that had come from within the castle changed suddenly to shrieks of rage and howls of fear. Yells of pain pierced the air, strange fumes began to rise from the bailey into the sky, and the drawbridge, already lifted some distance from its harbourage, began to descend more rapidly than it had risen. It did not descend, however, it seemed, rapidly enough for those who, penned within the castle they had thought to capture, were now eager to escape from their prey. A confused mob of bellowing peasants scrambled on to the drawbridge while it was still in air and rushed madly forward, leaping from it as it descended in their mad eagerness to escape from the precincts of the castle, many falling in the struggle into the moat and screaming there as they swam desperately hither and thither in their effort to escape from pains the water infuriated instead of allaying. As the drawbridge fell to its place the bailey vomited forth a raving rabble, many of whom blazed like torches, heedless of the lances that were now sweeping from all directions upon the rescued castle. Within the bailey Villon could perceive through the portcullis fantastic flashes of coloured flames leaping hither and thither like gaudy serpents, while thick clouds of smoke and an intolerable stench were wafted skywards.

A few minutes later, when the last of the Jacks had either perished or made good his escape, Villon, still holding Katherine's horse, entered the castle and learned from the smiling lord of Little House, his pink face quite crimson with unfamiliar excite-

ment, and his white locks floating patriarchal, the secret of the unexpected succour.

Vaucelles, that had played no part in recent wars and had never looked to play a part in such a war as had then come to a close, like most of the castles in Poitou, carried no guns to make such an attack as that of the Jacks impossible. But it held within its walls a chaplain that was not only a man of religion, but also a man of science, and one that had before now expounded to Villon the results of his studies in the manufacture of gunpowder. Thus it had happened that when the rising set fire to Grigny and Beaumains and swept the people of Little House into the shelter of Vaucelles, there was plenty of gunpowder available in various stages of fineness to have served a number of occasions if only such occasions had existed. Now the lord of Little House, who piqued himself on being something of a student and a scholar, had soon scraped a companionship with the chaplain, and from his knowledge of the ancient wars had suggested that in the absence of offensive guns they might devise defensive weapons. He talked learnedly to the chaplain of this siege, and that, and of the excellency of the old Greek fire in particular, as a means of discomfiting your enemy at close quarters.

The chaplain, inspired and encouraged by an interest in his craft unfamiliar to him, set to work, and thus it came about that the gunpowder, which had been of no use to prevent the peasants from laying siege to Vaucelles, proved of material service at the very moment when those peasants believed themselves to be masters of the castle. For even

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before their first wild cries of delight at finding themselves within the bailey had died away there began to rain upon them from every loophole around strange missiles that carried flame and death and foul odours in all directions. The flying fires consumed those they struck with an unquenchable flame, and the maddened, helpless wretches chose rather to fling themselves upon the lances of those that waited outside than to perish helplessly in a pit of falling stars.

All this the lord of Little House explained blandly to Villon, though his eyes watered while he talked and he coughed at times spasmodically because of the fumes that still lingered around the blackened and bloodstained bailey. But Villon had other matter to think of than the achievements of the lord of Little House. For the great gate of the main building was thrown open, and on the top step Villon saw Loysette standing and smiling as if nothing out of the way had taken place.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A PRINCE'S PROGRESS.

CONCEIVE this bloody business at an end ; the trampled grasses green again, the blackened spaces in the bailey sluiced and scoured into cleanness. Assume a certain number of dead peasants hurriedly buried, less for the sake of their wretched bodies than for the sake of the sweet air. Take it for granted that an uncertain number of living peasants, scattering in desperate flight, are cowering in caves and the dark corners of woods, dreading a hunt that never comes and frightened out of all desire to rise and fight again for rights and liberties denied to them. Accept the triumph of the law of strength in Poitou ; forget the weak and wretched ; welcome the coming of a sunlit Prince.

The province was, as it were, swept and garnished for his presence. No uncouth images of hunger were anywhere visible to offend his delicacy. Through glow of bright colours and odour of sweet essences he moved majestically to meet majesty. A kingly brother, too impatient to await a princely brother on the threshold of Vaucelles, rode forth to anticipate

his arrival, to intercept his pompous advance. The illustrious pair clasped and kissed with such a fervour of fraternal love that the favoured spectators wept for very tenderness of sympathy and affection at the beholding it. The Jacks were out of the way, were thought of no more.

Ever since that famous meeting beyond Vaucelles, with its pleasant results of open amity and latent alliance, Louis' spirits were high, and, for him, blithe. He did not indeed allow himself to be shamed by the splendour of Charles into any furbishing of his appearance. His rusty, dusty habiliments remained dingy and seemed more dingy than ever by the side of Charles's peacock splendour, but their wearer seemed to take a kind of pride in asserting the contrast between the squalor of the Sovereign and the lustre of the Prince.

But if the satisfaction of Louis with the condition of affairs disdained to assert itself in outward show, it was made manifest to his familiars by his general cheer. He was unwontedly merry; would tell lewd tales to all and sundry with a zest, and plied his wine as gaily, if not as deeply, as his brother and his brother's jovial friends. He said freely, and left it to be plainly understood when he did not say so, that his good humour was entirely due to his happy reconciliation with his brother; and he was ever ready to suggest that he should esteem no concessions too great that would continue him in the enjoyment of the family affections and the fraternal peace.

It was only in the intimate and isolated companionship of Olivier le Daim that he allowed his

bearing to relapse into a more easy-going grimness and permitted the astute barber to see some of the meshes of the web of guile he wove.

The little snare that Louis was pleasing himself with spinning was, as he explained it to Olivier, or perhaps it should be said, as he allowed Olivier to guess at it from hint and innuendo, simple enough. The King was setting a mouse-trap, with Katherine for the bait and many-coloured brother Charles for the mouse. Almost the only quality the two kinsmen had in common was their love of woman, and Louis, conscious of his own desire for Katherine, surmised that his brother would be very likely to share his taste.

So much once assumed, more might be reasonably expected to follow. If Katherine yielded to the brilliant prince—and Louis was self-critical enough to admit that her denial of Louis might not necessarily infer a denial of Charles—if Katherine yielded, why Villon was not the man to take the matter lightly. He might rather be relied upon to yield to the promptings of jealousy and revenge, heedless of the rank of his adversary. Some misfortune might happen to brother Charles, said misfortune taking very likely the form of a dagger-stroke in the side, and then it would be Louis' duty to avenge his brother and assert the cleanness of his own fingers by hanging his murderer. Incidentally the little plot might end by leaving Katherine at the King's mercy.

It was an ingenious scheme, over which the King chuckled a good deal as he winked at Olivier and grinned at Olivier, and hinted to Olivier with

clipped words and curtailed phrases and little twitches of pantomime. Olivier took his drift briskly enough and gave the business his benediction with a twisted smile. There could be little question of the Prince's fancy taking fire at sight of Katherine. Any pretty woman could allure him—indeed, many that were scarcely fair had gained his passing grace—and Katherine's rare beauty was not likely to leave him untouched.

What Olivier cynically doubted was the likelihood of Villon playing his expected part in the game. He found it frankly incredible that anyone who had been lifted from mean estate to wealth and lordship and lands would readily fling all these aside and solicit a once-avoided gallows, merely because his lady happened to be politely submissive to a prince of the blood royal. Olivier could not imagine himself doing anything of the kind ; and what he would not do in any given condition of affairs he found it difficult to understand anyone else being willing to do.

He confided his doubts to his master clearly enough, but that master only smiled ambiguously and affirmed, though still with the same vagueness that had cloaked all his conversation on the matter, his confidence that all the wheels of his little machine would move as he desired them to move. Which shows that in the quality of imagination, with its attendant power of appreciation of character, the King had the advantage of the barber.

On the other hand, Olivier had no doubt whatever that Katherine would prove entirely pliant to the avowed wishes of the Prince and the hidden

wishes of the King. He recognized, as frankly as his royal master, that for a beautiful young maiden to resist the overtures of a plain, ungainly, slovenly fellow like Louis was one thing, but that for a beautiful young married woman, who was believed to be by no means happy with her lord, to be adamant to the advances of a handsome, affable, gloriously-garbed, chameleon-tinted Prince like Charles was a horse of quite another colour. But Louis felt further that even if the incredible occurred and Katherine failed him, even then the schemer need not fear discomfiture. The solicitations of the Prince would only increase in the event of any such unexpected resistance, and those very solicitations must serve as so much venom to gall and sting Villon into such irritation as might result in—anything.

The King conceived himself herein as playing the part of a providence. His was not the hand to strike at a life so near to him, nor his the hand to place the appointed weapon in apt fingers. But if another, unprompted, unordered by the King, were in avenging his own wrong to remove at the same time a stumbling-block on the King's path, what was there to say against that? The victim would suffer the just chastisement for his sin. A profligate prince would die by the vice of his profligacy.

In recording the sum of King Louis' conversations with his barber, Villon's historian, Dom Gregory, as is occasionally his way, anticipates a little the march of events. While some small part of his scheme was adumbrated to Olivier on the way to the

meeting between the brothers, more of it naturally was elaborated after the King had from his own observation of events found no little reason to believe that things would work as he wished. For the moment, however, we are again in the company of the princely brothers as they ride side by side towards Vaucelles, the one as golden as the sunlight, the other as sable as the daw, but the eyes of both wet with happy tears over a reconciliation that was to prove so fruitful of joy for the great personages concerned. The day was fine, the air was fresh, all spirits were blithe. No one remembered the bloody business that had reddened the grasses and reddened the skies of the province so short a while before. It was King's weather, it was Prince's weather, and who so bold or so foolish as to darken it with talk or thoughts of dead or dispersed rebels?

Villon received the royal brothers in the gateway of Vaucelles. The King clapped him on the shoulder and called him his gossip, at which Tristan frowned and Olivier grinned. Charles clasped him affably by the hand and congratulated him on making a clean sweep of the miscreants that had been so unmannerly as to seek to mar the favour of his visit, and as he uttered his suavities Lescun smiled jovially at his host over the Prince's shoulder. Villon, bowing his head in silent acknowledgment of the Prince's praises, conducted his exalted guests across the courtyard to the main building.

During the last few days, since the dispersal of the Jacks, all that the castle's own resources could produce, and all that Poitiers could provide in

supplement, had been employed in the adornment and decoration of the ancient stronghold to make it wear a show of splendour worthy of those that were to grace it by their stay. The wealth of Vaucelles was great, and Katherine was resolved, far more than Villon, that it should be spent with princely profusion in honour of the princely visitors. So it was through a glow of gold and colours which touched even the jaded taste of Charles, and which made Louis rejoice that it was another and not he who was playing the host, that Villon conducted the King and the King's brother into the great hall where Katherine was waiting to receive them with her women about her.

It was plain that at the first sight of Katherine the Prince was struck in a wonder. Her brilliant beauty had never seemed more brilliant. Experience, and her strivings with the warring passions of love and rage and jealousy, had given to her face a firmness of expression without robbing it of its girlish grace. She still seemed very young, and the imperiousness of her carriage contrasted almost fantastically with the delicacy of her youth. As she bent before him in a sweeping reverence, Charles almost uttered a cry as if his heart had been hurt by her loveliness.

Eagerly he caught her by the hand and lifted her from the floor; eagerly he looked into her eyes, as if he hoped already to read in them some exquisite promise. Her eyes met his passionate gaze calmly and their tranquillity fired his spirit as if they had smiled him a defiance. He caught his breath; for a moment the liberal lover was at a loss for

words ; he could only stare at her with longing painted in flame upon his cheeks, a splendid image of speechless desire in gorgeous raiment. He was all silver-colour, all gold-colour : he seemed like a salamander playing in its native fire.

At last he found his tongue and began to pelt her with compliments as he would have pelted her with flowers, and, indeed, his speech was as sweet as violets and as rich as roses and as suggestive as eglantine. Katherine listened to his courtly homage with unfluttered lids. Admiration had ever been her portion, and her senses had been better flattered by the praises of a writer of rhymes than by the conceits of courtiers. So she listened gravely while the enamoured Prince rolled off his compliments, and feasted his gaze upon her face.

In another hour even the ready Prince might have known embarrassment at the composure with which Katherine accepted his patent adoration, for it was not his wont to find his advances met by an indifference too absolute to be called disdain. But now he was like a man dizzy from some sudden stroke, or half drunken with strong wine, and the stroke that so shook him was dealt by her bright glances, and the wine that overcame him was the wine of her manifest beauty. So he babbled his fancies, bold in praise, incoherent in phrase, content that while he spoke he knew not what, this exquisite creature should stand in front of him to be looked at, to be longed for.

Already the evil flames were withering his heart, burning away honour, duty, chivalry, leaving nothing in that house of flesh but desire and the

resolve to please it at any price. What Katherine guessed of his intentions she kept to herself ; neither mouth nor eye betrayed her knowledge or her scorn, and when at last he made a halt in his fiery protestations she gave him no more than such a quiet smile as might have rewarded the recital of a nursery rhyme. Very naturally such fashions only served the more to enflame the passion of the man. His wishes galloped headlong ; his wits reeled ; all about him the great hall seemed to grow black as impalpable night, and on that darkness swam a luminous space that showed the face of Katherine.

Louis watched the amorous comedy with satisfaction. His trap was well planned, it seemed ; his quarry was taken by the bait. He had counted on the potency of Katherine's beauty to conquer Charles, remembering how it had quickened his pulses in the past and could quicken them in the present, if he ever allowed himself to waste time in a losing game. It gratified him to see that he had not counted unwisely, that his scheme seemed like to succeed.

Katherine's indifference meant nothing to him. That indifference was her defence ; the armour of a proud woman in pain ; her ice would melt by and by beneath the golden rays of the princely sun. So Louis rubbed his hands and licked his lips, and felt more than usually content with himself and his power of making the human dolls dance as he wished.

If Katherine yielded to his brother's suit, why, then he was revenged for her old disdain of him, for he knew of her pride in her purity. If Katherine

yielded to his brother's suit, why, then he was revenged upon Villon, who had won the heart that Louis could not touch. If Katherine yielded to his brother's suit, why, then it was well within his chances that he might be revenged upon Charles too, for being so comely and so dazzling and so troublesome. Altogether Louis was vastly pleased with himself and showed it by smiling sardonically on his enraptured brother and commenting to others on his visible infatuation.

CHAPTER XXVII.

DELIGHTS AND DEVICES.

THE days sped merrily at Vaucelles in a seeming endless gaiety. The lordlings of the province were now quite reconciled to the authority and dignity of the lord of Montcorbier. They even felt grateful to him for leaving them at home while he rode to meet the Prince, for had they been abroad when the Jacks rose their castles might have shared the fate of Grigny and Beaumains. They regretted only that they had ever followed the lead of the Lord Gontier, who seemed now to be of no importance in the Upper Province. Yet he was in the province again, come back from no man knew where, having failed, no doubt, in his enterprises at the ducal courts, to find his castle in ruin, and to take shelter for the time being with Bishop Thibault d'Aussigny in the Bishop's palace at Poitiers.

Loysette laughed when she heard of de Grigny's return. She was always laughing now, the mad maid of Little House, and no one seemed merrier in Vaucelles or happier than the King's daughter. Katherine accorded her a stately friendship. The Prince, when he was not in Katherine's company,

paid her the gracious homage of an affectionate relative. The nobles of Poitou sought the favour of the King in serving her. Villon, for his part, kept as much aloof from the girl as might be, at which also she laughed.

As for King Louis, he was enjoying himself amazingly. His little scheme seemed to be working itself to the desired solution with a directness beyond his hopes. Charles was flagrantly enamoured, and for Charles to be enamoured was but the first stage in a series of desperate enterprises.

Katherine was indifferent to tranquillity, but Louis knew, or thought he knew, enough of women to consider himself justified in taking this as a favourable symptom. The only drop of disappointment in his cup came from the conduct of his host.

My lord of Montcorbier not only showed no sign of displeasure, or even irritation, at the patent wooing of the Prince, but did not seem to be aware that any such wooing was going forward, and only stared with an amiable show of ignorance when Lescun, in all good faith, congratulated him upon the Prince's favour. He played the master of the castle to perfection, devised entertainment after entertainment with a felicity and a fertility born of and fostered by the infinite experiences of the Court of Miracles. Everything that an ingenious mind could devise for the entertainment of two royal princes was carried out with a completeness perhaps only possible to a poet who had won his laurels among showmen and swindlers, tumblers, jugglers, and the other whimsical Bohemians of the thieves' quarter of Paris.

That there was a comedy of another kind from the jolly comedies he devised being enacted under his eyes never seemed to occur to him, and, in consequence, the possibility of such a comedy turning to the tragedy dimly, if unconfessedly, desired by the King, seemed less than likely. Still Louis did not lose hope. A man may be patient, may even be complaisant up to a certain point, but when that point is reached may see the heavens hung with red, may fling complaisance to the winds and, becoming for the instant just an ordinary commonplace, mad, angry wild beast, do that in his wrath which there would be no undoing.

If indeed the worst came to the worst and François proved tamer as a noble than he had ever shown as a rogue, there was still the pleasant reflection that Louis had in some degree squared accounts with him, and on the other hand Louis could count on the increased affection of Charles for the sake of the good turn he had done him. So, as we said, Louis was very well pleased with himself. But to make one or two or even three persons uncomfortable to the peril of their honour and their lives was not in itself a feat of sufficient magnitude to keep Louis' nimble fancies stagnant, or to afford him all the entertainment he desired. While doing mischief on a large scale with his brother and his host and hostess for the pieces of his play, he was now also anxious to make a little mischief on a smaller scale with less important persons.

Although Louis had steadily persisted in wearing his own shabby raiment during the period of

Charles' visit, and seemed quite content to show crow-like against the peacock effulgence of his brother, Louis, in his heart, resented not a little the popinjay carriage and gorgeous habiliments of the youthful knights and gentlemen from Lescun downwards who had accompanied him from Bordeaux. All these young gentlemen were dapper cavaliers, valiant carriers of lance, pretty swingers of swords, fellows that plumed themselves on their power to win a lady's praise in the tilt yard. Furthermore, they had justified their pretensions to chivalry in such entertainments of the kind as had been given at Vaucelles since the coming of the Prince, and Louis' own following had for the most part come off second best in these pleasant encounters.

Now there was to be yet another tournament in a few days on the same great strip of open land behind the castle where the lists had been maintained through all this joyous period. King Louis, racking his brains for some means of inflicting humiliation upon the chivalry of Guyenne, believed at last he had found what he wanted. He had commissioned Tristan to see if he could find for him, between Tours and Poitiers, some mighty fellow of his hands, some giant from a fair, or huge man-at-arms that would serve the purpose he had in view.

Tristan, busying himself upon his master's business, reported that he had found just such a fellow, a sturdy beggarman, that seemed as if he might have stood for the model of St. Christopher. This fellow Tristan had come upon on the high-

ways, and under ordinary conditions would probably have hanged him out of hand for being a beggar, but with the King's wishes warm in his mind the fellow's mighty thews saved his life for the time being, and Tristan clapped him into gaol until he knew further of his master's purpose.

Now Louis let Tristan into a larger share of his confidence. This same burly beggarman was to save his skin by wearing a skin. In a word, he was to play a part in a mask of the King's devising in which he was to enact a savage man. The idea was this: At a point in the coming tournament, when the knights of Charles' following were preparing for the chief encounter of the day, a great, hairy giant on a huge horse and brandishing a massive club, was to make his appearance suddenly from outside the lists and, falling upon the gentlemen, to do them as much damage and discomfiture as he could with his bludgeon.

If the man were truly as huge and as powerful as Tristan reported, there seemed little doubt that he could wreak considerable havoc among the gilded heroes of Bordeaux, and Louis promised himself an infinity of satisfaction from the spectacle. Therefore he arranged with Tristan that the fellow, who, it appeared, was quite willing to play any part required of him to save his neck and fill his pockets, should be hidden in a peasant's hut in a wood hard by to Vaucelles and there provided with a suit of furs, a huge club, and a horse that were to convert him into a savage knight. In this way he was to lie concealed from the evening preceding the tournament until the time on the next day when

he was to come riding at all adventure like a giant out of a fairy story into the lists of Vaucelles.

Now, although Louis intended this little mystification to be kept secret, the secret was not kept quite closely. Tristan may perhaps have been a little careless in Poitiers when giving his orders for the manufacture of that coat of savage skins which was to transform his beggarman into a wild creature of the woods. The beggarman himself, flushed with his own importance as one that played a part in a King's jest, may have babbled. The tailor that was employed to fashion the strange suit may have talked too freely to neighbours of his unusual job. However it happened, rumours of that suit of many skins floated here and there, floated to the Bishop's palace in Poitiers, with results.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FLIGHT OF BIRDS.

ON a certain day King Louis, with some appearance of mystery in his manner, came upon his host alone in the great hall, and drawing him aside, intimated that he proposed to honour him with a confidential mission. He was, it seemed, at once to abandon his care of all preparations for the Prince's entertainment, and to ride with an escort to Tours with a message from Louis to the Lord Bishop. This message was none other than a warning to the Lord Bishop that any further harbouring, countenancing, or supporting the Lord Gontier of Grigny would be regarded by his Sovereign as a grave defiance and contempt of the King's majesty.

Louis seemed to François to make a quite unnecessary bustle about this sudden errand. He sent for Lescun, and bade him in François' presence express to his master the deep regret Villon felt on being obliged to ride on the King's errand thus summarily. Louis himself supplemented these excuses by explaining that he would not have

despatched François were it not that the matter required the handling of his most trusted confidant, and that the absence of a host would be amply compensated, if not by the presence of a hostess, at least by the fact that where the King was the King himself was host.

It may be frankly admitted that François felt considerable doubt as to the genuineness of the reasons expressed by Louis in his choice of a messenger, and, indeed, very little doubt as to the real reasons which inspired him; but an attempt on his part to protest was met by a whimsical smile on the royal face, an encouraging nod of the royal head and a lifting of the royal finger to the mocking royal lips.

"Do as you are told, gossip," he whispered in Villon's ear; "perhaps your journey won't last very long, after all. God's Easter, do as you are told, and trust to your old friend."

A little later Villon was riding along the road to Poitiers with a small troop of armed men jingling and clinking behind him. The day was bright and blithe and full of cheer, but there was little blitheness or cheerfulness in the rider's spirit. His fortunes seemed now to be full of menace; happiness had slipped between his fingers; honour was in peril; the thing that he might have to do was of such a kind that merely to think upon it must darken the most joyous spirit. Though he had always aped the cynic, he was, like most of that school of philosophers, less inclined to taste the bitter sweetness of its teachings where his own affairs were concerned, and he felt woefully little

diverted at finding himself in a situation calculated undoubtedly to afford entertainment to others.

As he rode along the familiar highway his brooding spirit teased itself with memories of other journeys on that road ; of that Sabbath, so short a while gone, when he and his lady went to attend Mass in Poitiers, with all the disasters and adventures that came of that laudable intention. As he reached the turn of the road where on that same Sunday he had found the figure swinging in effigy, his attention was abruptly diverted from his own thoughts by a curious incident. A large number of ravens, startled apparently by the near approach of so many horsemen, rose out of the wood to the left and floated in a black cloud some little way above the tops of the trees as if waiting for their interrupters to go by. Villon's squire Bertran rode up to him.

"I think I know what that means, my lord," he said, pointing to the multitude of obscene birds.

"What may it mean ?" Villon answered, not indeed particularly interested in the matter, but glad enough of any interruption to his own melancholy reflections.

"My lord," said Bertran, "I have followed the wars for nothing if there be not a dead body lying in that coppice, and we have disturbed the ravens at their banquet."

On hearing this, Villon insisted on an examination, and, springing from his horse, pushed his way, followed by Bertran, into the depth of the wood. The squire's words were confirmed. There was a little clearing in the heart of the wood ; in that

clearing was a peasant's hut ; and in front of that hut a man lay on the ground on his face, dead. The dead man was remarkable enough, from his monstrous size and breadth and the hugeness of his limbs. He lay very like a fallen giant, and a deep wound in his broad back between the shoulders showed how he came by his death.

To Villon there seemed something familiar in that prostrate form, and when with the aid of Bertran he had rolled the dead man on his back he found that his fancy was justified. The slain giant was his old enemy, the beggarman who had helped to head the revolt of the Jacks, and whom Villon had cut down in the charge that swept them out of the field. On his forehead was a cicatrice of the stroke that François had dealt him, making a V with the old scar which had formerly disfigured him. Villon surveyed the body with much surprise. Clearly the fellow had escaped from that wild rout of the peasants, and from the blow which Villon had very certainly intended to be mortal ; but how, having so escaped, had he come to meet his death here in this lonely place ? Whose interest could it have been to kill him ? Bertran touched Villon's arm.

"There has been a horse here," he said, and he pointed to the grass about them, which, indeed, even to an unexperienced eye, showed the heavy pressure of horse's hooves. The mark of the hooves led from a kind of shed at the side of the cottage to the edge of the trees that cradled the clearing, and seemed to proceed thence through the trees in the direction of the highway beyond.

Villon shrugged his shoulders. There was plainly some mystery here, but it was impossible to read it.

"In the meantime," he said, "let us hide this poor devil from the ravens," and he bade Bertran go to the highway and return with two of the soldiers. These he ordered to make a grave as best they might and bury the dead rascal, after which they were to follow with all speed in the direction of Poitiers. Then he mounted again, and with the rest of his troop resumed his journey. He had not, however, gone very far when his progress was again interrupted. At another turn of the road a horseman stood, who seemingly waited for him, as on his approach he put his horse into motion and advanced to greet François. There was no mistaking that dark, sinister, ungainly figure, more ungainly, perhaps, than ever astride a horse, the figure of Olivier le Daim. Olivier beckoned to François.

"A word with you, my lord of Montcorbier," he said, and while the troop came to a halt Olivier and Villon rode a little way up the road. Then Olivier spoke again.

"My lord, the King has changed his mind," he said, "and has need for you at Vaucelles. I will go on to Poitiers with his message to the Lord Bishop. You will return with all due speed to Vaucelles. I think you will find the King waiting for you before you get there."

Villon knew Louis and knew Olivier well enough to be sure that Olivier, in speaking thus, was speaking the truth. So as he never cared for much speech with the barber he bade him good-day, and,

turning, made the best of his speed back again over the road he had so recently traversed, while Olivier, with the men-at-arms at his heels, continued the journey to Poitiers.

As Villon rode past the wood where he had found the body, he thought he could hear from within the sound the soldiers made in shovelling the grave with the blades of their swords. As he rode he kept asking himself, without finding a satisfactory answer, what was the meaning of the King's sudden change of purpose, or, rather, the King's pretended change of purpose; for it was clear the matter must have been arranged with Master Olivier before Villon set out from Vaucelles. While he was puzzling over this possibility and that, and really at a loss to guess what sinister intentions the King might be cherishing, he came upon Louis himself walking peacefully upon the road at some little distance from the castle.

The monarch waved to his subject with that air of genial condescension which had generally the effect of producing a sinking at the heart in those thus favoured. Villon felt sure that something untoward had occurred, or was very likely to occur, to create in his royal master such a show of hilarity.

"Dismount, gossip, dismount," said the King, rubbing his hands cheerfully; "we must have a little chat together, and you will not need your horse."

Villon obeyed the command and walked by the side of the King, leading his horse. Louis for a few paces preserved silence. Then he spoke again.

"Gossip," he said, "I make no doubt that you who, before you became by God's grace and deed, a gentleman, were a poet, and one that knew the world, have reached the conclusion that life is, after all, very much in the nature of a game of chance."

Villon admitted that some such profound reflections had from time to time occurred to him, and had, indeed, found expression in some of his verse. The King nodded.

"Excellent," he said; "then, arguing as philosophers may do, from the greater to the less, you have no doubt heard it affirmed by many who are acquainted with the married state that marriage is also a game of chance."

Villon nodded his head in silence. The King went on:

"Of course, you are now in a better position to decide for yourself the truth of that theory, and frankly, my dear poet, not as king to subject, but as man to man, beating heart, as it were, to beating heart, may I say that I think I am not altogether mistaken if I venture to guess that in such a game of chance the chances are not always altogether agreeable."

"Your Majesty," Villon began somewhat hotly, but the King gently deprecated interruption with a wave of his claw-like fingers.

"Come, gossip, come," he murmured. "The King must take things as they are. A poet may grieve and feign and make pretence like a child with its dolls, but a monarch who loves his subjects must have keen eyes for their misfortunes."

Villon had a great deal to say, but even in ill-humour he had learned prudence, and for the moment said nothing.

"It is possible, my good friend," Louis continued, laying his fingers arrestingly upon the arm of his companion; "it is possible that life, which has had some trials for you in the past, may find some further trials for you in the future, even it may be the immediate future. Let us remember and be comforted by the thought that all such trials are sent us from above to strengthen our character and stiffen our moral purpose."

If ever subject since the world began felt a desire to strangle the individual whom Heaven had placed in authority over him, Villon was at that moment such a subject; but again curbing commendable human impulses, he asked the King, somewhat incoherently, what was the purpose of his words. By this time they were very close to the castle. Another turn of the road would bring them in full sight of the great grey stronghold. Louis, with the precise manner of one who was directing a purpose that had been carefully planned and rehearsed in his mind for some time before, instructed Villon to lead his horse aside into the wood and tether it to a tree. "You can send for it by and by," he explained to his somewhat astounded subject. When this was done, the King and Villon proceeded by a by-path through the woods, which led them out at the back of the castle in front of a small barbican, from which an easily movable plank conducted to a postern door. Louis crossed this, followed by

Villon, opened the door, and the pair entered the castle.

"May I ask your Majesty," Villon said at this point, "where you are doing me the honour to take me?"

"You have asked," the King answered gravely "but you may not ask again. Be good enough to remember that for the present you are acting under my commands, and that I expect from my servant implicit obedience."

CHAPTER XXIX.

BEHIND THE ARRAS.

LOUIS seemed to know his way about the Castle of Vaucelles a great deal better than Villon did, who was, if only recently, its owner. He climbed up strange staircases, glided through unfamiliar passages, walked confidently along corridors that Villon had never seen, and at last came to a halt before a small door in a wall, which he unlocked with a key he carried. Villon had no idea, in consequence of the many twistings and turnings of their journey, in what part of the castle he was now to find himself, but following his Sovereign's lead through the little door he found himself in a small, narrow room that served as an oratory. An aperture in the farther wall of this room was heavily curtained with faded arras, on which still lingered a design of Jupiter overcoming the maiden scruples of Danaë by transforming himself into a number of large gold coins that seemed to come, from their image and superscription, from a very earthly mint. The subject caught the eye of Louis as soon as that of Villon, and he pointed it out to him with an ironic shake of the head and an

ironic elevation of the shoulders, as much as to imply that the world was very much the same as it was in the days when gods still walked abroad.

Advancing to this arras the King stooped a little, and peering through a rent in the aged tapestry, surveyed the room beyond. Having done so, he lifted his head again with a sigh of satisfaction, and turning, beckoned to Villon to take his place by his side and see what was to be seen in his turn. Villon, looking through the chink, beheld a large, richly-decorated room, which he recognized at once as one of those that had been set apart for the service of Prince Charles. There was no one in the room. As Villon looked, wonderingly, and fearing what was to happen next, the King touched him on the shoulder.

"Lend me your dagger, friend," he said, and when Villon had done so, he cut for himself another aperture in the tapestry a little way from that through which Villon was surveying the empty room.

"Remember," he said in a low voice, as he handed back the dagger to François, "you are to speak no word and make no movement until I give you permission."

With that he applied himself to the peeping-hole he had made and for some seconds the two stood there, behind the dusty arras, sire and vassal, staring with great intentness at an empty room. After a short time, which for different reasons seemed a long time to both the watchers, the sound of footsteps was heard, and in another moment a similar tapestry to that which concealed them was lifted at

the farther end of the large room and held back by Lescun to afford admission to Katherine. She looked around the unoccupied room with some surprise, but Lescun was swift in explanation.

"His Majesty will be with you in a moment," he said, "as soon as he has taken leave of his brother." Then, without waiting for her answer, he let fall the tapestry and disappeared.

Louis placed a restraining claw upon Villon's wrist as Katherine moved slowly up the empty room with an air of some uneasiness and surprise. There was a chair at the end not far from where the watchers stood, and in this Katherine seated herself, tapping the floor impatiently with her foot. She had sat there thus for perhaps a couple of minutes when the tapestry concealing another door that opened on the room behind where she was seated, and not visible to her, was withdrawn, and Prince Charles silently and stealthily entered the apartment. Stealthily though he had entered, and silently though he stood after lowering the arras, regarding Katherine, her quick ears caught some sound, for she turned in her chair, and seeing him, rose to her feet.

"Your Highness," she said in angry surprise, "I wait here at the King's will."

The Prince made a deprecatory gesture.

"My brother is not here," he said suavely; "my brother has other business. Will not my company serve for the time?"

He looked very brisk and self-confident as he spoke. He was habited as the conqueror of ladies in his bravest and gayest, till he looked for all the

world like the ideal prince of a fairy tale. If the King exaggerated his passion for simplicity of attire, his princely brother delighted to exaggerate his own passion for fine feathers. Every ribbon, every jewel, every hue of his raiment had been carefully considered, with a view to its individual splendour of colour and its appropriate harmony with a richly-coloured whole. So splendid was he in the glow of his rich stuffs and precious stones and soft silks and delicate essences, that he might well have been the chief in some great masque, passing for the best presentation conceivable by him of the god Apollo, the Sun god, the glittering, the bewildering, the dazzling. But Katherine was neither bewildered nor dazzled. She made him a grave reverence.

"His Majesty was pleased to send for me," she said, "but as his Majesty is not here I will take my leave."

"Lady," said Charles, with a great air which was a happy discrimination between the condescension of a deity and the adoration of a prince, "that is the last thing I should wish you to take. Take all else—indeed, you have taken all else, heart"—and he pressed his breast—"wit"—and he touched his forehead—"ambition, save the ambition to be lifted to your lips. All these you have taken, all these are in your keeping. Will you not give me some gift in exchange?"

Katherine looked at him with a slight smile which belied her answer.

"I fear I do not understand your Highness," she said.

"Yet surely," said Charles, "my adoration has been patent. Have I for one moment concealed the homage I lay at your feet? Have I attempted to dissemble the admiration which I felt the first moment that I saw you?"

Katherine's smile was now almost a laugh, and might have caused some discouragement in any common suitor, but the ruler of Guyenne was no common suitor, and was said, like the Phoenix, to find new force in the airs and graces of semi-reluctant, or even of really reluctant ladies.

"Lady," he said, "if I have not been plain enough in my wooing I will be plain now beyond possibility of mistake. I love you; I want you. Am I understood?"

Katherine made him a little reverence.

"I think I like your Highness better," she said, "when you speak so than when you go round about like a man in a maze that knows what he would be at but cannot find the way."

"So long as I gain your liking," said the Prince lightly, "I care not how I gain it. Shall we seal our new knowledge," and he moved towards her and made as if he would take her in his arms. But Katherine held him off with a gesture.

"Wait, my lord," she cried; "in Heaven's mercy, wait. Are you so hot a gallant that you would run down your quarry as soon as you have wound the horn. You tell me that you love me, and you think, I take it, that because you are a great Prince, and the King's brother, that there is no more to be said. But there is more to be said. For example, I have a husband."

The Prince threw up his white fingers with a pretty action of disdain.

"A husband," he cried. "Good lord, the mountebank. Surely he does not count in the matter? Why, the world knows well enough that you bear no love to your husband."

"What the world knows is not always what the wife knows," Katherine said quietly; "and with my husband and me the world has nothing to do. Nor have you, for that matter, Monseigneur."

"Nay; but I have," the Prince protested, "for I love you, which is more than that mountebank has a right to do, and I do not think of him as an obstacle. If I did, he could very well be put out of the way. Why should we waste time in talk of him? Be assured he will not trouble us," and again the amorous gentleman advanced, and again Katherine repulsed him.

"My lord," she said, "your talk is all of one side, like a painted mask. It is 'I love you,' and 'I love you,' and 'I love you,' words which I guessed very well and heeded very little. But I do not love you, which I heed very much, and so I think there is an end of the matter."

"Nay, not at all," the Prince retorted, anger beginning to shine in his fine eyes. "This is some qualm, some hesitation, I care not what. If what you say were true, as, indeed, I cannot believe it, why, then, shall we say that it flings a pinch of spice into the wine of desire."

"You forget, my lord," said Katherine disdainfully, "that you are speaking to me in my own house, where you are my guest; that I have but

to raise my voice to be no longer alone with you."

"As to that," said the Prince impishly, "I trust Lescun has taken charge for that. Really I do not think there is anyone within call, and it would be a pity for you to strain your sweet voice in the effort. As to this being your house, fie upon the foolish argument! It is no more than the ugly cage for a lovely bird whom I shall set free after my own fashion."

On this promise he moved nimbly forward across the floor with determination in his mien. But even as he came near her Katherine reached swiftly forward and took from its house the Prince's dagger where it dangled by his side, and flashed the steel in his eager face. The fear of treachery which is the evil genius of princes made him for all his bravery wince at that symbol, and involuntarily he recoiled a pace or two.

"My lord," said Katherine, holding the weapon in a firm hand, "I am no woman to be handled against my will by princes."

"Pretty lady," urged the Prince, who had now recovered an equanimity that had been something dashed by the sudden show of steel, "put aside that unpleasant toy and forswear the amazon. Do you think you are a match for me at dagger play?"

"I do not know," Katherine replied quietly, "and I suppose it would be something like treason to stick this knife into a prince's flesh, but I can defend my own flesh with its point; and if you come a pace nearer you will find that I shall be wiser than Lucretia and do the killing betimes."

Now this was not at all to the Prince's purpose. He came to woo and he came to win, but he foresaw with great disfavour the prospect of a lady lying in her blood upon the floor and the consequent scandal, and it did seem to him, for all he was cynic, that Katherine had a mind to do what she threatened to do. So now he proceeded to ply her with delicate entreaties, with sugared suggestions, employing all his amorous artillery that had battered down the defences of so many a fair wherever the Prince had travelled. Meantime, behind the arras there was a raging man that could only with great pains be restrained by his companion, who was enjoying himself hugely.

But by and by, when the Prince found that he made no more impression upon the heart of his listener than if his warm words had been so many snowflakes, he began to grow less of the troubadour and more of the ruffian. His candid phrases swelled into gross epithets, his innuendoes shifted to a tavern outspokenness, and then in the very middle of a lewd phrase, Louis, who felt that he could restrain François no longer, gave him a push, and the astonished Prince saw an unexpected curtain sway and Villon appear before him. At the sight of her husband Katherine said nothing, but flung the dagger behind her, and folding her arms moved a little way apart.

The Prince leaped back and felt for his sword.

"To me, Lescun, to me," he cried, but he cried in vain, for Louis, who never did things by halves, had taken good care to have Lescun and his friends out of the way, and the nearest room filled with the

King's following. Behind the arras Louis rubbed his hands. Villon moved towards the Prince with his hand on his sword.

"My lord," he said, "you have been something of a fool and something of a knave in this business, and I think it is uncomely of a King's brother to play so base a part. But in playing it you have uncrowned yourself and must make amends as if you were no better born than myself," and therewith Villon drew his sword.

Now the Lord of Guyenne cried out once more for Lescun, and got no answer, as well might be, and then glanced wildly from Villon to Katherine, wondering if this had been a trap set between them. But the woman seemed so scornful and indifferent and the man so angry, that he deemed this could not be, and then his glance travelling backward, noted a little bulge in the arras by the wall and a black shoe that pushed, too eager, beneath it, and he guessed the game.

Prince Charles was a brave man in a fair fight, but he felt that he was in a snare, with Villon an insulted husband, as ready to take his life as you please, and a brother behind the arras waiting to see the trick done. Here was a case of wit against wit sooner than sword against sword. Louis was a nimble spirit, but Charles was not halt. Magnanimous humility might save his perilled skin. His face showed no consciousness of the black shoe.

"My lord of Montcorbier," he said courteously, "you are to be congratulated upon a wife as honourable as fair. She is the noblest lady, I dare

swear, in all the realms of France. To my shame be it spoken, I have assailed her in most unworthy fashion, taken by that madness which makes prince and peasant alike its victim and alike ridiculous. If you feel that I have wronged you so deeply who, indeed, have only wronged you in foolish thought and foolish word, strike if you please and strike unchallenged," and the Prince flung his arms apart as if to welcome to his breast the extended sword of Villon.

Behind the arras, as may be guessed, was a twisted man in black, cursing horribly. Villon lowered his point, something puzzled by the Prince's conduct, and Charles went on again :

"If, however, you are willing to let me kneel to your lady and humbly beg her forgiveness for my sin, then when I have so cleansed myself, if it please you, you shall cross swords with a son of France."

Villon was all at a loss. He had come from his concealment full of bloody purpose, caring no jot for the royalty of his enemy. But the Prince's suavity, the Prince's humility, the Prince's penitence, bewildered him, and he turned to Katherine as if in appeal, and Katherine bent her head in sign of acceptance. Villon sheathed his sword.

"Do as you say, Monseigneur," he said.

The Prince turned to where Katherine stood apart and dropped on one knee before her.

"Lady most fair and lady most honest," he protested, "here humbly on my knee I beseech your forgiveness for my presumption and my folly, and I swear that whatsoever penance it may please

you to impose on me for my sin, that penance I will obey and fulfil to the uttermost."

Katherine answered him quietly.

"You have my forgiveness, my lord, and let your penance be, next time you desire an honest woman to deny yourself a folly."

The Prince rose to his feet.

"I shall obey you, lady," he said, and he turned to François and drew his sword.

"Come, my lord of Montcorbier," he cried, and Villon drew in his turn.

The two blades met for a moment and the Prince lowered his weapon.

"Are you content?" he said, and Villon bent his head.

"I am content," he answered, and turning to Katherine, took her by the hand.

"Let us go hence, Kate," he said, and the two passed slowly out of the room.

The moment they were gone Prince Charles, with his sword in his hand, sprang to the arras and dragged it aside, but the oratory was empty, and when he rushed to the little door beyond he found it locked against him.

Katherine and François, moving in silence through the antechamber, caught sight in a further room of a number of the King's men gathered about the fireplace. Villon came to a halt.

"Let us go back," he said to her, "and bring the Prince with us."

They returned to the room they had left and found the Prince standing in the midst with his hand to his forehead.

"Monseigneur," said Villon, "will you honour us so far as to accompany us to the hall?"

Charles showed no surprise at the offer, but accompanied Katherine and François from the room. As they came to the antechamber where the King's men were waiting, the Prince was talking brightly to his companions, and seemed to take no notice of his sinister visitors, who on their part let him and those with him pass unquestioned.

In the great hall they found Louis walking slowly up and down and rubbing his hands with something of a sour smile on his visage. There were many of his own people about him, and he was conversing very affably with Messire Lescun and other of the Prince's gentlemen, who seemed somewhat embarrassed under the honour.

"I wish to speak to my brother," said the Prince, and Katherine and François saluting him and each other, went their different ways. The Prince advanced to his brother.

"Dear brother," he said, "I think I must ride homewards this evening."

"By all means," said Louis affably; "and I, for my part, will return to Tours. But now it is time for our little tournament."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SAVAGE MAN.

DOM GREGORY, whose recently-discovered manuscript was found lying in an old candle-box in the Abbey of Bonne Aventure in Poitou, very much as the lost manuscript of Propertius was discovered under a wine cask—Dom Gregory devotes, to our regret, a great deal of his parchment to an account of the pomp and order and ceremony of the festivities with which Vaucelles did honour to the visit of Prince Charles. Dom Gregory, it would seem, was an insatiable enthusiast for all the pagantry of life. He never wearies in description of courtly entertainments and the blazoning of coats of arms and the recording of solemn masques and formal tournaments. Even in the tale of the last tournament given at Vaucelles during the Prince's stay, when there is so much matter of moment immediately to be set forth, he is as prolix as may be over every detail, and there were many details, of that day's business in the lists. He omits no colour of coat armour, spares no name and, indeed, no genealogy of knight-challenger or knight challenged, and rejoices in the elaborate enumeration of the various passages of arms. To

read him one would think that no such fight had ever been fought since Greek and Trojan grappled beneath the walls of Troy, with Helen shining like a star above the Scæan gate.

To us, however, the much bepraised occasion seems very much the same as any one of many hundred such tournaments that were fought for the pleasure of princes before and after through many a long day. The memorable event for all concerned was not, for all concerned, part of the day's sport. King Louis had prepared his little jest with infinite pains and was eagerly waiting to see it take effect. Only Tristan and Olivier away in Poitiers were in the secret—the uninitiated at Vaucelles should see what they should see. Indeed, the time was now ripe, and from his silk-hung gallery King Louis eyed the distant highway anxiously. Most of the honourable encounters had honourably taken place and the moment had arrived when the chivalry of Guyenne, occupying the clear lists in a solid body to the number of some twenty or so, trumpeted their challenge to the world at large to meet them in the shock of arms.

The understanding was that this challenge was immediately to be responded to by a corresponding number of the chivalry of Poitou duly selected for the occasion. But King Louis had instructed these nobles to hold their zeal till he himself with lifted hand should give the signal for their response. For this was the point at which the King's little practical joke was to take effect. From where he stood he and those with him in the gallery could see over the broad clearing behind Vaucelles a strip

of the white high road where it sharply turned a corner towards Poitiers. Round that corner King Louis now expected to see his jest appear incarnate, and on the instant his expectation was gratified.

Round the corner there came riding slowly a fantastic figure upon a mighty horse. The steed indeed had need to be huge for the bearing of his monstrous burden. He that bestrode the great black beast seemed indeed as if he might be some descendant of the Anakim, but it was not the bulk so much as the appearance of the strange horseman that caused the first surprise. For the man, if man he was, that came jogging at his ease towards Vaucelles, was not clad after the fashion of a courtier, nor did he carry the trappings of a knight, but he seemed indeed to have no covering worked of hands upon his body at all, but solely to be guarded against the weather by his own un-human growth of hair.

Like unto one of the fabled satyrs he was, with shaggy locks tumbling about his ears and a fringe of ruddy beard concealing the greater part of his face, so that little of it could be seen but two glittering eyes that peeped through the locks that swayed in front of him. He had a wreath of green leaves upon his head and round his seeming naked, hairy body a girdle of green leaves. His saddle seemed made solely from the shags of wild beasts and his huge hirsute limbs gripped these skins with the ease of a ready rider. For his only weapon he carried a massive club studded with spikes of brass.

When King Louis beheld this apparition he

clapped his hands together with delight, and at the same moment the savage man, as if catching sight of the lists and the gay company, gave a kick to his beast, and covering the little space between him and the meadow, made his appearance at the entrance at the very moment when the knights of Poitou were waiting for their signal. By this time, of course, all present had been made aware of the strange new-comer. Every eye in the galleries, every eye in the lists was turned towards the blatant brute who had made his appearance, and who now, before those at the barriers could in any way delay his progress, had pushed his huge horse through their opposition and was galloping across the arena brandishing his mighty staff.

The marshals of the lists sprang forward in indignation to intercept this unexpected stranger who seemed so regardless of the formal rules of the joust, but King Louis, leaning forward, sharply recalled them.

"Let be," he protested, "let be, here is a thing out of an old tale of the days of Amadis when giants warred with knights-errant."

As he emphasised his words by waving back the astonished marshals, it was plain to them that the King was not so amazed as they were by the sylvan apparition, and it began to dawn upon them that the furry man was the puppet of a little comedy to which the King was privy. Eager whispers ran along the excited galleries, and every knight and lady among the spectators leaned as far forward as possible to obtain the better view of an unexpected entertainment.

The pagan man, who had reined up his horse while the King was restraining those who would have interfered with him, thundered forth a furious challenge to the knights in front of him, and then without waiting for a reply again urged his horse to a gallop, and brandishing his primal mace, hurled himself upon the chivalry of Guyenne. These, for their part perceiving the King had checked the attempts of the marshals to interfere with the progress of the woodlander, understood that it was the King's will that the strange combat should continue. Thereupon the leader of the Guyenne knights rode forward with levelled lance to meet his fantastic adversary. But the giant was upon him before he had ridden many paces, and his lance failed to strike the shaggy body of the savage, whose swiftly-lifting and descending staff swept the noble of Guyenne from his saddle and left him helpless upon the arena. Without pausing for a moment in his charge, or waiting for another knight to advance from the waiting body, the invader directed his course straight for the cluster of Prince Charles's champions. He rode with astonishing ease upon his mighty war-horse, who obeyed every pressure of his rider's knees and needed no restraint of bridle to guide him. He employed both his hands in wielding the massive weapon which was his only arm of offence or defence, and whirling it high above his head he hurled himself directly against the little company of astonished gentlemen.

They had scarcely time to make ready for a common defence, many men against one, many

knights in fine armour against one that seemed to have no other protection than his hairy pelt, when he was amongst them, dealing out blows with his ponderous bludgeon as easily as a housewife might have handled her rolling-pin. Knight after knight rolled from his saddle to the sand. In the close quarters lances were of little avail, and while some backed out as best they might to get again to charging distance, others drew their swords or snatched their maces in the hope of finding those hand-to-hand weapons more effective against their enemy. But nothing seemed to avail against the activity, the readiness, and the strength of the adventurer. He could ward off blows with his herculean club as easily as he could deal them, and the stroke of offence succeeded the ward of defence so swiftly that many a stout knight had scarcely delivered his blow before he felt the weight of the cudgel upon crest or shoulder, and went down in his turn, another victim to the savage man.

Those that had withdrawn now came charging to the aid of their distressed companions, but they fared no better than their fellows. Although some lances did indeed strike the seemingly unprotected body of the wild man, his hide must have been of uncommon toughness, for the blows failed to shake him in his seat and more than one lance splintered against his seeming naked body. With a wild roar of triumph the huge fellow urged his horse anew against his last assailants, and before the mighty sweep of his weapon the steel-clad knights went down as fatally as the poppies before the rod of Tarquin.

When the last of the gentlemen of Guyenne had been unhorsed the stranger uttered another bull-like bellow of exultation, and then, turning, urged his horse towards the gallery where the King sat stroking his thin hands together and smiling a faint smile of satisfaction at the discomfiture of his brother's chivalry, a smile which found no echo on the set face of the Prince.

When the savage came to the gallery he brought his horse to a halt, and hooking his club by a leather thong to a horn of his saddle, he stretched out both his mighty arms in supplication to the King, while through the tangled masses of ruddy hair that obscured his face those that occupied the gallery could see his fierce eyes gleaming.

"Sir Stranger," chirped the King, unable to conceal his delight at the success of his little conspiracy and the complete discomfiture of his brother's following; "Sir Stranger, though we know you not, you have truly deserved well at our hands and should wear a gold chain in token of our admiration of all prowess from whatever quarter of the world it come."

As he spoke the King rose, and, taking a gold chain from his neck, was about to offer it to the savage man, when he, shaking his head and muttering unintelligible things, pointed to Loysette where she sat at the King's left hand, even as Katherine sat at his right. The King smiled a little, not displeased.

"You wish to receive your guerdon from the hands of this lady," he said. The savage nodded. Louis passed the chain into the hands of Loysette.

"Reward your champion, child," he said ; and Loysette, flushed with the unexpected compliment, rose to obey his order.

Now the gallery in which the King and his company sat was raised at no very high level above the lists, and as Loysette leaned over the silken parapet to bestow the reward she was only a little way above the expectant horseman. As she extended her arms he extended his, and placing his two hairy hands suddenly on either side of her waist he swiftly lifted her into the air over the barrier and on to his saddle bow, before any spectator had time to find voice of wonder at the deed.

With the astonished girl held firmly before him the victor gave his horse a slight turn and proceeded to move slowly a few paces along the lists. Louis was something taken aback by the suddenness of this unexpected action, but conceiving it to be a part of the jest unrehearsed by him, and prepared by his fellow conspirators for his special delectation, he said nothing, but stared in as great a marvel as the rest while the giant with his bewildered burden in his arms seemed to be describing a large circle in the centre of the arena. Suddenly, however, he quickened his speed, the measured pace changed into a gallop, and in another instant the huge horse and its double burden bore full tilt and unimpeded through the entrance to the lists and went thundering up the white highway towards the turn in the road.

The fugitive had reached the turn in the road, had rounded it and disappeared, before King Louis

began seriously to recognize that this looked like something more than a piece of additional buffoonery added by Tristan and Olivier to his own invention. Naturally what had not at first taken the King unawares, took unawares still less those that were present in the lists and galleries, who, after their first surprise at the coming of the Hercules, had seen his acceptance by the King and taken him for granted accordingly.

But now in a flash Louis felt that something had miscarried and sprang to his feet pale and trembling.

"Stop that man," he cried; "bring that man back," and he pointed a trembling hand in the direction taken by the vanished savage.

In a moment all was confusion. The luckless knights of Guyenne who had been unhorsed by their strange opponent were scrambling to their feet as best they might with the aid of their squires, and were in the sorriest condition for pursuit of any kind. The gentry of Poitou, however, that had stood at gaze, were nimble enough and were in their saddles almost as soon as the last word left the King's lips, and were streaming at full speed through the parted barriers in pursuit of the truant.

Guests and soldiers, pages and servants, officials of the lists and minstrels, went this way and that in meaningless clamour, asking impossible questions, obtaining impossible answers and adding nothing but noise to the misfortune of the day. The old lord of Little House, leaning over from where he sat, was clawing at the King's shoulders with white trembling fingers and babbling angrily in the ear of the tragic mask. Then the King lurched

forward and lay huddled in a swoon, and many flew to attend him.

Serene in all the hubbub, Katherine turned to Villon with a smileless face and touched his hand lightly with hers.

"You should seek for the King's daughter," she said, and said no more, and turned away her head. The next moment Villon had laid his hands on the barrier and vaulted lightly into the lists. Then he ran to where horses were tethered. As he ran he saw on a bench a crossbow and its quarrels; he snatched them as he ran almost unconsciously. When he reached the horses he leaped on the one that seemed at a venture the best, and in another moment he was sweeping out of the lists and on to the highway in the direction taken by the French knights.

The road to Poitiers from Vaucelles is a winding road that turns and twists like a crawling snake, and though Villon rode hard and rode well it was some minutes before he came up with the cavalcade of pursuers. Beyond them, far ahead, the cloud of dust indicated their quarry. That cloud of dust vanished in a moment, but Villon knew the reason why. The rider had come to where three roads parted and must choose one. From that point pursuit at least should not be difficult.

The French knights rode fast, their horses were fresh. In a few moments they had reached the point where the main road branched into three, and there for a moment drew rein in despair. For the three roads lay plain and straight before them, any object on them visible for a long distance, and

the difficulty which now presented itself was not which road the flying rogue had taken, but which was the flying rogue. For in the distance of each road there rolled away from them a cloud of dust, caused in each case by a rapidly-galloping horseman.

The French knights began already to believe that magical influences were at work, but undaunted, they hurriedly divided their number into three parties and each party set off at full speed in pursuit of one of the three flying clouds of dust. Only Villon remained behind, standing at the cross roads and tickling his chin thoughtfully.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE CLEARING IN THE WOOD.

Now Villon began to remember where he was, and to find a reason for the remembrance. It was natural enough that he should find that turn of the road familiar, for it was at that very turn in the road that coming from Poitiers on the memorable Sunday he had found a travesty of himself dangling from a shabby gallows. But that was not at all why he recalled it now. He was thinking of a more recent recollection, of groping a way through those thickly-planted trees, of coming upon a clearing and a hut, and a dead body. He remembered, too, that the dead body, the body of his beggar-disciple and beggar-enemy, was of monstrous bulk and much such a size as the mysterious savage who had now carried off Loysette.

Villon's wits began to piece this and that together. The coming of the savage man was clearly no marvel for the King, for when the lists-marshals would have stayed him the King prevented their interference. Therefore, the coming of the savage man was one of those practical jokes in which the saturnine King delighted. But the

King was taken aback by the ending of the jest ; that clearly was an unexpected scene in the little comedy. Therefore it followed that he who played the part of a savage man was not playing it in accordance with the laws of the game laid down by Louis, was perhaps not the man he originally intended to play the part.

How if the dead beggarman had been the original player, and had come to his death at the hands of someone who wished to wear his hairy skin ? There was instantly a man in Villon's thoughts whose bulk was equal to, if it did not surpass, that of the dead beggarman. That man would have had good reason for ending the jest in so unexpected a manner. That man was Gontier de Grigný.

At least he would see if the clearing in the wood had anything fresh to tell him. Quietly he slipped from his horse and tied the beast to one of the trees on the fringe of the forest. He did this purposely instead of seeking to conceal the horse by taking it a little way within the wood. If there were any answer to his fancies yonder, that waiting horse might serve as a signal to riders-by and prove of service. He still retained the crossbow he had caught up as he ran to horse. He examined it now and found it in right working order. To his chagrin the little pouch of shafts he had thrust into his belt contained only two quarrels. He regretted this, for if facts leaped to meet his guess-work it increased the odds against him.

Cautiously he made his way through the thicket of old trees, treading warily over the soft carpet of fallen leaves that were yet too fresh to be

treacherous, and so came bit by bit, looking watchfully, listening warily, to where the trees began to thin and the green clearing lay.

Dropping on his hands and knees he crawled cautiously, keeping well behind the tree trunks till he was near enough to command a view of the clearing. The first view brought a sharp disappointment. The clearing lay before him empty. In the middle broken earth and scattered sods of turf and a large lump of stone marked the spot where his soldiers had made so short a while ago a grave for the beggarman. Beyond lay the cottage as before with its door a little ajar and its shed to the left. Nothing seemed to have changed since his earlier visit, and for a moment he feared that his speculations had deceived him, that he had pieced evidence out of gossamer that floated from his fingers.

But on the instant a sound came to his ears from the shed which strengthened him in his beliefs. It was the sound of the jingling of a chain, such a sound as a horse would make if it shook its head for ease or in reaching for fodder. There was a horse in the shed, then, which had been empty when he left. Someone had come here; surely that someone was the man he sought.

As he reflected thus the door of the cottage was pulled open and the savage man came out into the clearing. His grotesque mane of russet-coloured hair had been plucked away and discarded, and the bull-face of Gontier de Grigny showed itself unveiled on his bull-neck. But he still wore his suit of skins, probably because he had not yet found

leisure to strip it off, and in Villon's eyes he seemed more repulsive in his displayed identity than when his features were hidden by the mane of the monster.

Softly Villon drew his bow in front of him, softly slipped a quarrel into its channel, softly drew the string to the nock and softly trained his artillery upon his enemy. It was no part of his purpose to shoot down the big man unawares, however little de Grigny deserved any scrupulosity of treatment, or he would not have acted thus, for you cannot adjust a crossbow, however gingerly, without the risk of making a noise. Villon did make some noise, though not much, but it was enough for de Grigny to hear, and he looked sharply about him. At first he saw nothing, for Villon lay very flat and snug among the leaves behind his tree, and while the giant peered about him in all directions he presented a tempting butt to a marksman. But even if Villon had not cherished a native unwillingness to kill his man unawares, his commendable cautiousness would have reminded him that the target was not so ample as it seemed. Undoubtedly beneath his screen of skins the Lord Gontier had his body wrapped in steel. The splintered lances of the arena had made that plain enough. The only mark possible for Villon was the bull-face or the bull-neck beneath it, and those marks offered no sure aim to an unpractised bowyer in a man moving rapidly in a fairly wide space. For de Grigny, his suspicions aroused, was wandering quickly around the clearing and peering into the twilight of the trees about him to see if any-

thing was likely to disturb his quiet. Always as he moved he kept a watchful eye upon the cottage, and was, as it seemed to his observer, always keeping ready to fling himself quickly within its shelter.

Now, having apparently satisfied himself that no one was near, he seemed about to enter the cottage again. Villon's mind was divided by doubt. Should he, having found what he had found, leave Gontier undisturbed, make his way as cautiously as he could back to the highway and his horse and gather help swiftly for an attack in force upon a miserable shanty and a single man. Or should he make the effort, the desperate effort, to deal with the difficulty there and then, and pit his puny personality and ready wit against the giant. After a second of hesitation Villon decided to stay and play his game single-handed.

He was sure that Loysette lay a prisoner within the cottage, and so long as de Grigny had her at his mercy all the King's horses and all the King's men were no more peril to him—were, indeed, so Villon reasoned, far less peril to him—than a single man with his nimble wits about him and all the trickery of Paris between his head and his heels. Villon reflected that the match was not so unequal as it seemed. Though for long he had little experience of the crossbow he was not, or had not been, unskilled in its use. That same old soldier that had fought with the Maid and taught him tricks of sword-play, had been a good bowman in his youth, and kept his bow in his dingy lodgings. The boy had seen the bow and fingered it, and the

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old soldier had taken him many a summer morning into the meadows outside Paris and shown him how to shoot, until Villon, who was quick to learn anything, had become an efficient archer.

With bow ready he could rely on himself to stay any rush the giant might make at him, and it was secure in this confidence that he quietly slipped from behind his tree and greeted Gontier with a shout. The giant turned his head and stared with a look of astonishment that swiftly deepened to one of gratified hate; then, with an inarticulate cry of satisfaction, he made to advance upon his foe.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BIG AND LITTLE.

VILLON, with his crossbow levelled, called on de Grigny to stop, and there was something in the bearing of the little man, his firmly planted feet, his well poised carriage, and his air of accurate aim which made the giant halt.

"I am a good bowyer," Villon cried cheerily, "and you show a fair mark, Bull-face ; so if you are wise you will keep your distance, and we can have a talk if you are willing to call a truce for a time."

Gontier grinned at him.

"How long a truce do you want?" he asked maliciously.

"Ten minutes will serve my turn," Villon answered cheerily. "Shall we say till the shadow of yonder tree reaches that stone there which lies on the disturbed earth?"

Those that had buried the beggarman had been at some pains, it seemed, to hunt for a large stone, which they had laid upon the grave as a kind of monument to the dead.

"Till the shadow touches that stone, let it be peace between us, Bull-face, and thereafter war."

"I agree to that," de Grigny answered. "I am not sorry to have a little speech with you where I am likely to have the best of the bargaining. You have been very merry thus far, my lord of Montcorbier. You think everything must go your way because you had King Louis in your pocket. Now you see King Louis is in my pocket, and as I pinch so he will squeak, and I think it may all be a bad business for you, Parisian."

Villon lowered his bow cautiously. Gontier was at the cottage door, he was hard by the edge of the clearing. If de Grigny did make a rush, he would have his bow to his shoulder in an instant and try to take his game running. If he missed, why he was within the woods in a skip, and could dodge his antagonist for long enough.

"I do not see what you have gained this day," he said, "and I do not think you have King Louis in your pocket. If you are the wise fellow I take you for," and Villon's face was perfectly grave as he spoke, "you will see that you have carried your joke too far; you will make due amends, and depend very hopefully on the King's clemency."

The lord of Grigny rested his hands on his hips and laughed heartily.

"Why, you sprat," he cried; "why, you rabbit, you kennel-cat, you sparrow, what winds have you been drinking that you blow so big? I thought someone would come here when I found this," and he pointed to the newly-made grave, "and I have been waiting for a visit, and hoping for a visit, and I thank my luck that you are my visitor."

"I, too, am glad of it," said Villon softly, as he scanned the big bull-face, and wondered whether he might count on placing his quarrel if he fired now. A flat space above the nose between the bushy eyebrows seemed to him the spot.

"My young friend," said de Grigny, "you think yourself very clever, and King Louis thinks himself very clever, but I am cleverer than both of you. I heard of your King's piece of antique masking—I heard of his tame giant with his suit of furs and his time to ride in the tourney, and all the rest of the silly puppet play, so I came here where Master Tristan hid his tame giant, and I killed him."

"You took him unawares," Villon commented, "for he was stabbed in the back."

"I had no time to waste," Gontier grunted, "and the fellow was no more than a Jack. Then I took his horse and his furs and hid them elsewhere and waited till the trumpet sounded for the mellay. Then I came down the road to Vaucelles, and I think you know the rest."

"Not all," said Villon thoughtfully, his curiosity for the moment getting the better of his sense of duty. "For when we came to the turn of the road in pursuit of you there were three fugitives to follow, one for each road. How did you manage that?"

De Grigny rubbed his big hands together in an ecstasy of self-congratulation.

"My men are faint-hearted knaves enough," he said, "but I did find three of them that were willing to wait at the cross-roads till I came, and then

gallop away as if for their lives. I thought that would scatter pursuit and puzzle pursuers a little," and again he rubbed his hands ecstatically.

Villon nodded reluctant approval. De Grigny was not altogether a fool.

"You certainly laid your plans well," he said. "What do you hope to gain by it?"

"What do I hope to gain by it?" Gontier echoed. He dived into the cottage and came out again in an instant with Loysette in the crook of his left arm and his club in his right hand. The girl's hands were tied behind her back, and her dress was much torn, but the look she sent to Villon was not a look of fear. Gontier rested his club on one side of the doorway and stood the girl against the other, and pointed at her.

"This is what I hope to gain," he said grimly. "Had the conditions been otherwise, had I the province at my back instead of a handful of scared soldiers, I might have done otherwise. My Lady Katherine would have served my turn very pleasantly, and I think you would have disliked that, Master Poet; but from what I hear this way and that you dislike this, too, not a little."

As he spoke he was caressing the girl's face and bosom with his big hand and grinning hideously as he did so.

"But the Lady Katherine would have been no good to me afterwards, whereas this pretty shall save my lands and my title and make me of account again. For King Louis would move no finger to save Lady Katherine for your sake; indeed, I think, from what I know of our dear King, he would

rather have enjoyed the humour of the situation. But this sweetheart," and again he fondled her, "is the good King's daughter, and our Louis is a devoted father, and, as I said, he must squeak as I pinch."

"How if he refuse?" Villon asked defiantly, though he knew in his heart that what de Grigny said was true.

"He will not refuse," said the giant, "he cannot refuse. As things stand I am a lost man with nothing but my life to hazard. Well, I hazard my life. Not all the rogues in the King's service can save his daughter from dishonour and death, if I please. Go back to your master and tell him as much."

Villon affected to fall in with de Grigny's humour.

"What are your terms?" he said.

"Simple enough," Gontier answered. "I am to have the King's daughter for wife. I am to be promised a free pardon for all past offences, and he must swear to this by that oath he never dares to break. I am to be confirmed in all my ancient holdings, and I am to be made overlord of Poitou in your place, Parisian."

"You ask but little," Villon said ironically. Gontier grunted.

"I demand what I know I can have," he said. "You called me wise just now; well, I think you were right, and I think you think you were right, which is more to the purpose. And now will you go to the King with my message?"

Villon was in a quandary. It would seem natural enough that he should carry the ruffian's terms to

the King, but, on the other hand, he was sorely reluctant to let the adventure slip from his fingers. He looked at the girl as she stood by the doorway with de Grigny's hand playing over her, and he thought he read in the faintest glance of eyes that had never lost their pride, in the faintest twitch of lips that had never lost their courage under the man's caresses, an entreaty to him to stay where he was. So at least Villon read the faint change of expression that passed as it had come and left the girl motionless and scornful in the hands of her captor.

Villon had forgotten to watch the shadow that was to mark the term of their parley. Now he glanced at it and saw that the fine black point touched the big round mass of white stone as large as an ox's head which marked the grave of the beggarman.

"Good Bull-face," he cried, "I will never be your messenger. I fear me you have done a silly day's work, and will think it amiss ere it ends. For now our truce is over and I have a mind to do you a hurt, Bull-face."

Once again de Grigny was seized by one of his convulsions of fierce laughter.

"Why, you dwarf, you pigmy, you midge," he shouted, "do you think I am afraid of you and your arrows. Be off and do my bidding, or it will be the worse for you."

Stooping down, he kissed the girl noisily and her face flamed as if he had struck her. Then snatching up his cudgel he moved swiftly across the intervening space towards where Villon waited.

Villon's bow was at his shoulder ; he took swift and careful aim. If his old friend were now in Paradise, Villon hoped he might say a word for his disciple. Then he released the string. It was an age since he had handled a bow ; the shaft went straight enough, but the jerk unallowed for had directed it too high, and it passed harmlessly over the giant's head. In another second Villon, dropping his crossbow and leaping backward, had gained the cover of the wood, and was crouching warily behind a tree waiting the attack of his adversary.

Villon's slender figure could move at ease where the giant must blunder uncomfortable. For a few strained seconds the pair played a strange game of catch-me-who-can, in which Villon, always spry, was easily able to avoid the rushes of the giant. It was something like a battle between a monkey and a bull, sure to be very bad for the monkey if once the bull got within touch of him, but that thing very difficult for the bull to do. Gontier had no room to swing his club ; if he beat against a tree behind which Villon sheltered, Villon was off and away to other cover before the stricken tree quivered under the blow.

This was all very well while it lasted, but could not, Villon thought, count to last long. Villon was no longer the lithe boy of the Paris streets, who loved to plague the watch so rarely and could slip so nimbly between clumsy civic fingers. He was still alert enough, but the years were the years, and he had not played hide-and-seek in a wood for an age-long time. He must find some-

thing else, though indeed it seemed as if of the two the giant, stumbling among the trees and cursing, was likely to be tired out the sooner.

In the course of his divagations Villon had now approached again close to the spot where he had taken cover, and where his abandoned crossbow lay upon the grass. Swiftly he leaped from the trees, swiftly he pounced upon the fallen weapon, and scurrying across the grass, took shelter again in the wood, straining the string to the nock as he ran.

Gontier was in the open and after him in a trice, but Villon was among the trees, again skipping nimbly this way and that, and fitting the quarrel in its place. He had lured de Grigny by this time away from the cottage by the whole length of the clearing, and now while the giant was clawing after him in the thicket Villon boldly forsook his shelter, ran swiftly across the open with his crossbow in his hand, and was by the side of Loysette before de Grigny could emerge from the trees.

"Your hands," Villon cried, and the girl, turning, thrust them towards him. He made a quick cut with his dagger which severed the rope that bound her wrists, and then dropping the knife at her feet, turned and took his last aim at the giant, now thundering upon him but a few feet away.

With a desperate prayer upon his lips Villon fired and hit and missed. The bolt that should have struck de Grigny full between the eyes glided across the top of his head. It tore a furrow there that did him little harm, but deluged his face with blood from the scratch.

Dropping his useless weapon, Villon again made towards the wood, and again de Grigny, with a howl of rage, smearing away the blood from his eyes with one hand, leaped after him brandishing his staff. At the edge of the wood Villon turned and waited for him with a wild hope in his brain. There was a trick he could play in those old student days that had brought many a tall soldier to the earth. Could he play it now? It was his last hazard, but at least it was worth while.

De Grigny came thundering upon him, a hideous sight, his raging bull-face grotesquely painted with blood, and his bludgeon poised in the air. Villon, with his sword drawn, seemed indeed a pigmy compared to him, and de Grigny, his legs well apart, swung up his club to crush his enemy out of existence. As the club went up, Villon's sword dropped from his hands, and he stooped till he seemed something like a grasshopper, and then flung himself forward with a violent leap straight for de Grigny's feet.

The impetus of his jump carried him between the giant's legs, and as he did so his hooked hands, clasped around the giant's shins, dragged forward. De Grigny overbalanced, reeled forward like a falling tree, and lay his length on his face on the grass. Villon, straightening himself as he fell, snatched up the stone from the grave of the beggarman, and in another second was bashing it upon the fallen man's head, beating him into insensibility.

He had delivered two strokes and the giant lay motionless. In a frenzy of energy he was swinging

the stone for a third blow and feeling its weight scarcely more than if it had been a bag of feathers, when a touch on his arm stayed him. He glanced round, and Loysette was by his side with his dagger in her hand.

"Let me drive this into his neck," she said fiercely, "and so end him."

Through all the war of his emotions Villon had still clear wit enough left to see that she looked very beautiful with her torn dress and her flaming face and her weapon held steadily, like some glorious Judith about to swoop on Holofernes. But the rigid expression of hatred on her face recalled him to himself, and he flung the stone away from him, and it fell with a heavy thud upon the grass.

"Wait, girl, wait," he cried, and caught at her outstretched wrist. "We must keep this fellow alive for King Louis."

Then even as he said so he heard shouts beyond, and the trampling of armed feet through the forest, and men calling upon his name, and he turned a little to call back to them, and found suddenly that his voice had grown strangely weak like the chirp of a bird, and the girl beside him seemed to grow monstrous tall, taller than ever the lord of Grigny had been, and he looked up to her, as it seemed, and then gave a little cry and tripped and fell helpless across the body of the prostrate giant.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MAID, WIFE AND WIDOW.

WHEN Tristan and his men coming full speed from Poitiers were stayed by the sight of Villon's horse and broke through the trees into the clearing, they found little Villon in a faint across the body of big de Grigny, who had been pounded into unconsciousness, and the King's daughter bending over both. Villon was soon himself again after a draught from a flask that Tristan carried. De Grigny, still unconscious, was bound hand and foot and slung across the horse which had carried him so well in the lists at Vaucelles that day. The King's daughter insisted on riding in front of Villon, who could not very well deny her, and he only hoped from the bottom of his heart that Katherine might not be on the look-out when the party arrived at the castle. As a matter of fact, Katherine was at the gateway with the King when the cavalcade crossed the drawbridge, but she made no sign and said no word when Loysette leaped from the saddle and, running forward, flung herself into the arms of Louis, who clasped her and caressed her and cried over her with a royal indifference to the opinion of the onlookers.

A day that had begun busily in Vaucelles seemed destined to be busy to its close. After a little while the lord of Grigny was brought to himself, and dragged, heavily bound, into the great hall, where there was to be a kind of rough and ready trial.

King Louis sat on the daïs, with Villon on one side of him and Tristan on the other, and Olivier le Daim behind his chair. The squire of Little House nursed his knees at the King's feet, and the chaplain stood hard by with bent head and folded arms. The manner of the trial was brief. De Grigny was rapidly accused of crimes which he could not deny, and the decision of his master was exemplified in two swiftly succeeding incidents. The first was the marriage of Loysette, the nominal daughter of the lord of Little House, to the Lord Gontier of Grigny, duly and quickly celebrated by the chaplain. The second was the hanging of the said Lord Gontier of Grigny on a gallows hastily erected without the walls of Vaucelles. The whole business, trial, marriage and execution, was over well within an hour.

A little later Villon was pacing moodily the great hall. The King was closeted with his brother, discussing affairs of state previous to Charles' return to Guyenne. Katherine kept her chamber. Villon had scarcely spoken with her since his return from the forest. Event had succeeded event so swiftly in that thronged day that François felt like one that walked in dreams and fought with shadows. The loneliness of the great hall seemed to close coldly about his heart. After those fierce hours of struggle, of danger, of success, it seemed a kind of

annihilation to walk alone and brood. It is hard to drop from a life that burns at fever-flame to a humdrum hour of afternoon reflection in one's own house. When all was said and done, what had he won out of the business?

De Grigny was dead and gone, but he had never feared de Grigny, and for all he had a right to hate him, he could not think without a pang of that great mountain of fierce passions now so still and meaningless and harmless. There was but one thing he had hoped for in all the world, and it did not seem as if that fight in the clearing had brought him nearer to set love's laurels on his forehead. While he was drinking this sour wine his reflections were interrupted by the coming of a little page, a dapper cloth-of-gold little creature who shone in the late day's sunlight like a butterfly. He came, he said, from the lady of Grigny, who wished for instant speech with the lord of Montcorbier. With a sigh Villon rose and followed the page through hall and corridor till he came to the apartments that had been given to the King's daughter.

In a great room, gorgeously hung with the golden lilies of France, he found Loysette awaiting him. She was clad from head to foot in black, a swift tribute to her instant widowhood, and the sad trappings set off her strange beauty with a new and curious charm.

She was standing when he entered, and she greeted him with a smile and gave him her hand to kiss.

"You have saved my life, Master Poet," she said, "and I must needs thank you."

Villon made a gesture of deprecation.

"Even a poet," he said sadly, "may be of better use in the world than in the making of a ballade."

Loysette laughed brightly, and her merriment contrasted fascinatingly with the sable of her raiment.

"Is it not strange," she said, "for one to be wife and widow in the same hour and still to remain a maid?"

"It is a fortunate thing," Villon answered gravely, "when the husband happens to be Gontier de Grigny."

"I always thought he would come to an ill end," Loysette said; "yet at the end he had a King's daughter for wife, and got more than his deserts, though less than he desired. I wonder who will be my next husband."

"Some happy man," said Villon, "and I hope more comely."

"I shall take watch for that," the girl said thoughtfully. She paused a little, looking at him whimsically.

"I told you once that I fancied you mightily," she said.

"You were ever making a jest of me," Villon answered.

"No, no," the girl insisted; "I fancied you mightily and I fancy you mightily. How were it if you had a mind to step into a dead man's shoes and win a dead man's widow?"

Villon shrugged his shoulders. There seemed to him nothing to say, and, therefore not unwisely, he

said nothing. But the girl was not to be so put off.

"The King that can make marriages," she said, "can also unmake marriages. Why, it is but sending some great fellow booted and spurred from here to Rome, and a word in the Pope's ear, and then like the blow of a trumpet an ill marriage is dissolved and a man and woman are free again and glad of their freedom."

Villon looked at the girl with a frown.

"You say very true things," he said, "but I know not in what way they concern you and me."

Loysette threw up her hands with a little impatient gesture.

"Lord," she said, "when you see a picture in a painted book can it not please you unless the names of the folk be traced on labels over their heads? Can you not take Hector for his helmet, or Helen for her beauty, or Paris for his shepherd's staff, unless the names be writ fair? Well, then, have it plainly. You are wedded to a lady that loves you not. Here is a lady that loves you well," and she touched her breast as she spoke. "If you were free of the lady that loves you not, you might marry the lady that loves you well, and be, who knows, a happy man."

Villon looked moodily at the alluring girl and wondered at her whim and at her persistency.

"When you say that my lady loves me not," he said, "I think you speak at random, for if you spoke Heaven's truth I should be sadder than I am, which is to say much. And when you say that he who weds you has a chance to be a happy man, I think

you speak truth indeed, for the man would be hard to please who did not find you a marvel. But for myself I can never be your groom, for I love my lady with all my heart, and have so loved her since ever I first saw her and shall so love her as long as there is any life in my body or any wit in my brains."

The girl came quite close to him and laid a hand on each shoulder and looked searchingly into his face.

"You are very sure of this," she said, "sure, sure, sure?"

"As sure as I am that I draw breath and serve God," he said simply.

The girl pinched her lips together.

"I am sure you make a very noble lover," she said, "but I think you have spoilt a good lover of ladies. Well, go your ways. My father bade me say he would wait for you in the rose garden."

She gave him her hand again, and again Villon kissed it, and turned and left her presence and went his way. When the last sound of his footsteps had died out Loysette turned and, moving across the room, drew sharply back a curtain, shaking the golden lilies into a blaze, and revealed a little niche in which stood Katherine, very pale and straight.

"I told you what would happen," Loysette said simply.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LOVE, THE GARDEN GOD.

WHEN Villon passed into the rose garden he looked about him, but he saw no sign of the King. The summer evening was heavy with the scent of roses and musical with the vespers of the birds. Over the greenness of the grass the breeze had scattered wealth of rose petals of many colours, red and pink and white and yellow, that seemed to yield a fragrance to his straying feet. His head hummed with confused thoughts of that long day and all its strange work. He seemed to have lived many lives since the morning, to have filled the cup of the hours to the very brim, and yet there was an unreasoning voice in his heart that cried to him that the deeds of the day were not yet ended—that there still was wine of the day to drink.

He wondered dully what the King might have to say to him. He felt confused and purposeless as a man that has watched all night from dusk to dawn in the hope to see some vision and has failed to see it. He stumbled among the rose petals as he might have stumbled among tangling grasses, and fragments of old songs buzzed in his

ears. Suddenly he heard new footsteps in the garden and turned and beheld Katherine.

Katherine moved very slowly towards him across the petal-tinted grass, and as she moved it seemed to him with a sudden sharpness of knowledge that she looked more lovely than he had ever seen her, even more lovely than on that first fair and sacred day of meeting when she took the holy water from the fingers of an unknown poet in the porch of the Paris church in the narrow Paris street. She was coming straight to him with her hands a little extended, and her eyes were fixed upon his with the shining gravity of stars. She was clad in a blue and white surcoat, the colours of Heaven, over a green body robe, the colour of earth, and he thought her as she walked the image and pattern of all Heavenly and all earthly beauty.

She moved steadily onward till she was within a few feet of him, when she came quietly to a halt. It seemed to the enchanted watcher as if all nature instantly stood still with her; the flowers pausing in their growth, the birds dwelling on one note, the breeze swooning amidst the arrested leaves. Through the silent garden Hope sounded her clarion, and at the sound his heart seemed to share the fancied quiet of the world. He felt no tremors; his eyes were set as if by spells. Webs of blackness spun round him, webs that were golden in the sun.

In this magic mist he stood, and it was as if a great hand had carried him to the heart in a bright light.

darkness rolled away and the lightnings vanished and he could hear the birds singing again and was conscious of the scent of the roses, and he knew that Katherine was there and that she had come to find him.

For a little while Katherine said nothing, but just stood still where she had stopped in her walk and looked steadfastly at her lover, and there was question in her gaze and also, as it seemed to him, appeal. Villon, too, held his peace as one that did not dare to breathe lest the effort should dispel an exquisite illusion. All of a sudden, and very swiftly, Katherine flung herself on her knees before him on the soft grass and held out her hands to him, and as she did so his swimming senses fancied that all the roses in the garden bowed towards him in appeal. Then Katherine cried out in a shaken voice :

“ Lover, I love you ; love me, my lover, and give me back the joy of life.”

Villon gave a glad cry and lifted her from the grass to his arms and kissed her mouth and her eyes, her forehead and her throat. And as he did so it was as if the roses righted themselves and stood very tall and proud in the soft air, and the birds broke out into a brave singing. And Katherine gave him back his kisses and clung about him and sobbed for bitter sweetness of old sorrow and new happiness, and they changed the names of husband and wife very tenderly, and it seemed as if they were newly wed in that hour.

All this is set forth very briefly in Dom Gregory's queer Latinity. “ In hortum rosarum convenerunt

et pacem amoris osculando invenerunt." ("They met in a garden of roses and found the peace of love in kissing.")

This is all he says in his Chronicle, but I know how the meeting went. It was at this time, he says, that Villon wrote his Double Ballade of Hearts United, but the text of the poem is not to be found in the manuscript. Then Dom Gregory comments quaintly:

"There seem to be in the lay world many kinds of fair women, and the worst is she that cherishes the red devil of an evil temper and feeds it like the pelican her brood with drops of her heart's blood. She needs exorcism by whipping. But there be others, and these the best, that hide between their white breasts the sprite of divine kindness, and the lover that has such a mistress should cherish her with many kisses."

THE END.

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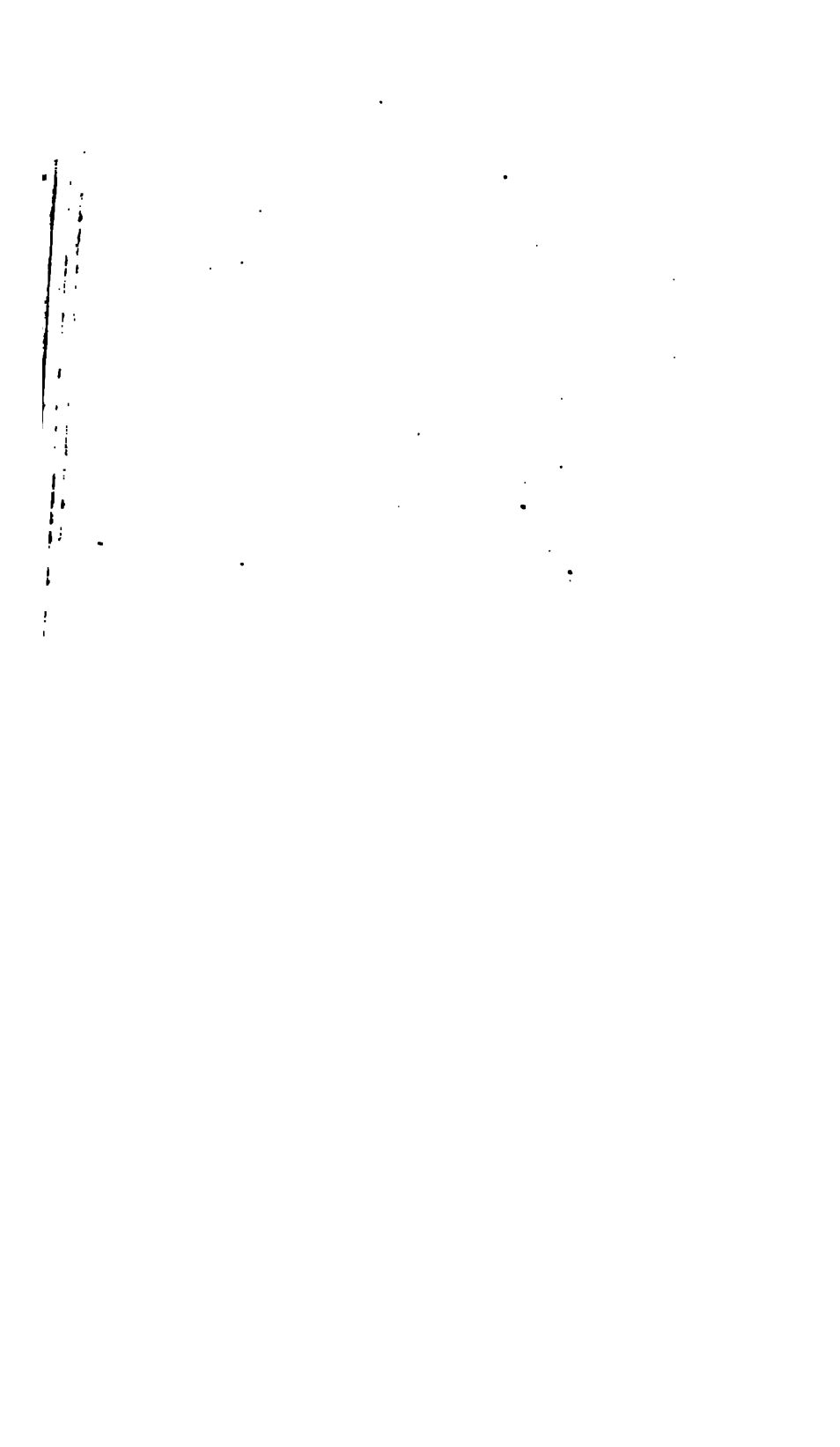
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